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Appraisal of Faculty Papers: Building A Framework from the Traditional to the Digital

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American Appraisal Theories and Practice – A View from A Private Archives

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The search for a unified theory of appraisal has been a central pursuit of archival thinkers for at least the last half century. In the United States, whether in agreement or disagreement, these theories usually begin with the work of Theodore Schellenberg, the first to articulate the concept that records have two values, evidential and informational.¹ Schellenberg's theory of informational value of archives rests as a cornerstone for many archives in the United States, who select and preserve materials based on perceived historical value, rather than as evidence of the functioning of specific organizations. Many of these archives exist in academic settings, with the purpose of supporting the research and teaching of their teachers and students; others exist to document specific localities, communities, or topics. In the wake of Schellenberg's ideas, many other appraisal theories and methodologies have been proposed, ranging from macro-appraisal and functional analysis to documentation strategy, collection policy, and use-centered approaches. The field of archival appraisal has developed to the point where practitioners and new theorists have very broad conceptual shoulders on which to stand when approaching the most difficult function of the archival enterprise.

Despite the range of theories, however, there remains a nagging feeling that each single theory only helps archival practitioners so much. While archival theory as an intellectual pursuit has matured greatly over the past few generations, we remain an applied profession whose successes and failures should be judged more by our actions than our words. In the area of appraisal, it is seldom the case where a repository can effectively employ only one methodology, as real world concerns make theoretical purity an afterthought, at best. These "real world" concerns lie at the core of an anti-theoretical approach to the field, best articulated in John Robert's article "Much Ado about Shelving."²

Practitioners should be skeptical of theories that do not deliver the practical goods, but there is a danger that tried and true methods cannot stand up to the complex world of documentation facing us today. The volume and complexity of modern records provide challenges to the traditional methodologies of the practicing archivist; rather than dismissing the work of theorists, practitioners must engage with appraisal theory, which can help our practices evolve to meet the complex requirements of today's ever-expanding universe of records. If theoretical models do not work exactly in particular situations, then they should be modified accordingly, or merged with other methodologies to forge a rational approach to appraisal, which can be explained to our colleagues, and more importantly to our donors and researchers.

The abandonment of the pursuit of a unified theory of appraisal represents the state-of-the-art in U.S. appraisal thought. In its place, a pluralist and pragmatic understanding of appraisal has emerged, what Frank Boles' refers to as a "big tent," which recognizes that local concerns drive which theories and methodologies work best in any given situation.³ This understanding is best represented by the Minnesota Method (MM), a process that borrows heavily from many different appraisal theories and unites them into a flexible approach that can be implemented in a variety of settings. Rather than a set of proscriptions, the method offers an adaptable process that can help archivists streamline the selection process.

Seven years ago, our repository, Manuscripts and Archives in the Yale University Library, used the Minnesota Method to develop a rational approach for the selection and appraisal of collections of faculty papers. Our paper today will describe the process we went through, and reflect on it and the impact the policy has had on our repository. Using our local experience as an example, we will conclude with some thoughts about the current state and future direction of American appraisal theory.

The setting

Before we review the methods and results of our faculty papers project, we need to describe the setting and context of our work. Manuscripts and Archives in the Yale University Library (MSSA) is a repository comprised of both university records and non-university related manuscript and archive collections. It holds approximately 50,000 linear feet of materials, half of which document the formal history of the university. The other half, the manuscript side, is comprised of personal papers and organizational records, collected on the basis of their perceived research value. Some of these

collections have no formal link to Yale, but most have some connection, either to the faculty, students, alumni, and other members of the Yale community; or to areas in which Yale has had strong teaching and research interest. The Yale University Library in which MSSA is located is one of the major academic research libraries in the United States and holds approximately ten million volumes, and an increasing number of resources in electronic form.

Since its formal establishment in 1933, Manuscripts and Archives has collected the personal papers of faculty members of the university, one of several groups from which the department solicits materials. Even though they often contain documents related to the life of the university, faculty papers are treated as collections of personal papers, rather than as record groups belonging to the university archives, and their donation is governed by the repository's standard deed of gift for manuscript collections. As of 1997, MSSA had acquired at least 225 collections of faculty papers totaling approximately 3500 linear feet.

In that year, we were assigned responsibility for analyzing the backlog of unprocessed manuscript collections in the repository and for making recommendations for ways to reduce its size. Our analysis showed a substantial number of faculty collections in the backlog and led us to closely investigate the repository's practice of collecting them.

Collecting faculty papers helped carry out our mission to support "the selection, preservation, and use of materials documenting selected areas of research and teaching interest for the Yale community," and to foster "documentation, study, and appreciation of the history and activities of Yale University." It quickly became apparent to us, however, that there had been no real governing principles behind what collections of faculty papers had been accepted or sought after in the past, nor what materials in them were considered valuable. Most of the collecting had taken the form of reacting to offers of materials and accepting almost everything. Nevertheless, we suspected that some valuable collections were not being acquired.

Our investigation focused on answering two questions: 1) from whom should faculty papers be collected and 2) what kinds of materials should be accepted. By answering these questions, we sought to develop a focused collection development policy for faculty papers. The need for such a policy was obvious; there are 3,300 faculty members at Yale University. We needed to refine selection criteria so that we would neither accept every faculty collection offered to us nor solicit only from those who won the Nobel Prize. Additionally, by determining what materials to collect, we could set appraisal standards for work in the field and for the processing of faculty collections in the backlog.

The process

As the first step towards answering the focal questions of the investigation, we reviewed the available literature. Several articles on this topic confirmed the importance of collecting the papers of faculty, but as a whole they did not provide effective guidelines for selection; had we followed their approach we would still be faced with an overwhelming amount of materials to acquire, preserve, and make available for research.⁴ An article from the seemingly unrelated field of business archives provided an excellent lens through which to view our project. The "Minnesota Method" (MM) was developed by Mark Greene, Todd Daniels-Howell, and other staff members at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) to articulate a systematic strategy for collecting business records in the state of Minnesota.⁵ Within their mandate to document business in Minnesota, the MHS faced issues analogous to our faculty papers situation. Simply put, the MHS's potential acquisitions far exceeded their ability to appraise, accession, and process, and the types of business collections that had historically been taken in often included materials that turned out to lack substance. Moreover, the records of Minnesota business comprised only one of several broad collecting areas for which the society is responsible.

The MM blends several aspects of different contemporary North American appraisal methodologies including collection policy, documentation strategy, macro appraisal, functional analysis, and the "black box." The sophisticated merging of appraisal theories and techniques intrigued us, as did the end results reported by the Minnesota archivists. We decided to attempt to apply the method to the collection of faculty papers.

Six steps comprise the Minnesota Method: 1) define and analyze a particular collecting area, and survey relevant extant holdings; 2) determine the documentary universe; 3) define criteria for

prioritization, and use the criteria to prioritize sectors, records creators, geographic regions, and/or chronological periods; 4) define functions most appropriate to collecting area and levels of documentation that relate to those functions; 5) test the model by applying it to actual appraisal situations; and 6) update. In short, the method allows archivists to prioritize records creators and to determine different levels of appropriate documentation that correspond to the priorities.

The Minnesota designers point out, "...only the structural outline or skeleton of the method is meant to be transferable from one repository to another; every repository setting will flesh out the content and practice of the method to suit its peculiar needs."⁶ That proved to be very true for us and our path diverged from the one pioneered by the MHS. We found that some of the six steps did not provide us with the same clarity of answers that they did for the Minnesota group; nonetheless, by proceeding through each step we examined a number of issues, and answered a number of questions, all of which helped us arrive at our own policy for collecting faculty papers.

Step one mostly confirmed for us that we needed to have some kind of collecting policy for faculty papers. They helped us carry out our mission and we had collected them in the past. We were continually being offered new collections and we intuitively knew there were probably faculty members we should be contacting. During step two we determined that our two most important documentary universes, the university archives and the manuscript side of the repository, each required a faculty papers collecting policy and they were not necessarily identical to one another. We had primarily been involved with the manuscript side of the repository and there was a university archives staff working on a records policy for the university. We concluded, therefore, that our policy statement should focus on which faculty papers should be collected for their value as research collections. The policy we developed incorporated much of what we learned from going through steps three and four, during which we examined whether and how to prioritize record creators or the functions of teaching, research, and public service in which they were engaged, and explored the kinds of records that best documented those functions. For the past five years we have been testing the policy (step five), and have reached the point where we can assess its efficacy and refine and update it (step six) as necessary.

The policy

The underlying assumption governing the policy we developed is that faculty papers are the personal papers of people who happen to be faculty members at Yale. These people can be of potential interest to us for several reasons, sometimes Yale-related, sometimes not: 1) they can influence or have an impact on the world outside of Yale and academia; 2) they can engage in path-breaking/extraordinary research; 3) they can be excellent teachers; or 4) they can have important university records. These reasons mimic the traditional conception of the three functions of the university: research, teaching, and service. Because of our underlying assumption, we determined that we should proactively document only those faculty members who have an impact on the world outside of academia and whose area of impact falls into one of the departmental, manuscript priority collecting areas. We would collect those personal papers, probably correspondence and unpublished writings, that best document their impact. We also determined, when applicable, to solicit faculty members who established new fields of study that had been replicated around the country and thereby had a pronounced impact on academia itself. We would consult with the faculty member to determine and preserve those materials that documented the process by which the field was established.

In addition to deciding what we wanted to proactively document, we also made key decisions about the types of materials we no longer wished to accession. We determined that documenting research through the published word found in the library's holdings proved adequate. If the impact of faculty members we contact is due to research they conducted, we would consider taking research related materials only if someone were to make a very compelling case about their uniqueness and historical worth. Word might reach us about a faculty member who is doing some kind of pioneering research that is beyond the normal standard of research done at Yale. If the quality of an individual's research was so extraordinary, we would explore with him/her what unpublished documentation of it existed that would be valuable to scholars and whether it included raw data that was not going to be preserved in a data archives. We would then determine what to preserve in Manuscripts and Archives. We know, too, that certain kinds of documentation generated during the research process, such as field notes and oral interviews, can be very useful to patrons. These are carefully evaluated to determine whether they should be accessioned. In the past we preserved what are commonly referred to as "research files."

These are generally collected materials related to fields of interest to the faculty member. With few exceptions, we will no longer take such files.

We realized that prioritizing based on impact on the larger world would also lead us to faculty members who might be defined as important teachers. In academia, one of the most important criteria used to judge how a faculty member has influenced his/her field is the number and prominence of the graduate students they have trained and placed in institutions of higher education. We would determine whether the faculty member has met this criterion. We named this our “C. Vann Woodward test.” Woodward, a noted historian of the American south, met both of our criteria for collecting faculty papers. His research, writing, and activism had a profound impact on the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and, it has been argued, the new directions in which he took the field of southern history helped lead to the creation of the field of African-American studies. Many of Woodward’s graduate students are considered the luminaries of the field of Southern history. They occupy prestigious places at prominent universities around the country and are setting the current research agenda for the field of Southern history. If faculty members were similar to Woodward, we would collect whatever documentation, usually limited to correspondence, there is of their influence.

By focusing on the “C. Vann Woodward test,” our definition of what makes a faculty member important from a teaching standpoint does not directly include what he or she does in the classroom. We concluded that the criteria for determining how to document “teaching” per se needed to be set by university archives representatives. If certain kinds of documentation they want to preserve are only found in faculty papers, they could develop their own list of faculty members to contact. When we appraise the papers of faculty members and find syllabi, reading lists, lectures, or lecture outlines that are of interest to the university archives, we can accept and turn them over to university archives representatives.⁷

We also argued that by definition, documentation of the daily/monthly/yearly work of departments, schools, committees, and task forces, which is sometimes found in faculty papers, belongs in the university archives. As with teaching materials, university archives representatives could generate their own list of faculty members to contact for such material, and we now alert university archives representatives to the existence of such material when we come across it.

Our policy acknowledges that a vita and photograph should be acquired for all faculty members, but especially those who are tenured. We knew from experience that researchers frequently ask for these items, which make it easier to track a scholar's work in the published domain. From a public relations perspective, requesting a vita and photograph often helps allay the disappointment of potential donors whose papers we decline. The university archives has an ongoing initiative to acquire such documentation and we coordinate with them as necessary.

To summarize, evaluating records creators is at the heart of our policy, followed by prioritizing those records that document what interests us about the creator. First and foremost, a faculty member is important to us if s/he has had an impact in an area outside of academia that matches one of our manuscript collecting priority areas. If there is documentation of that impact, we want it. If that faculty member also happens to have had an impact on academia because of the graduate students s/he has trained, we look for documentation of that impact as well. By prioritizing creator, we chose not to prioritize the functions of teaching, research, and service in which they are engaged, although “service” can lead to an impact outside of academia and that can lead them to us. By examining functions and their appropriate documentation, however, we were able to decide that selecting evidence to document classroom teaching and the administrative life of the university is best done by university archivists, and that for the most part, we will not accept documentation of the research process.

For five years we have been using our policy to guide us in collection development and the appraisal, arrangement, and description of faculty paper collections in the backlog. We have used it to select those faculty members to contact and proactively pursue. We read, for example, an obituary of a professor emerita in the English department. She was a scholar of Middle English, medieval Arabic language and literature, and Herman Melville, and had been associated with Yale as a faculty member and administrator for more than thirty-five years. She had also been an active member of the Zionist movement in the 1930s and an important figure in the founding of the state of Israel. One of our subject strengths is international relations and diplomacy, and we have a large and significant collection of materials from the 1930s and 1940s related to the establishment of an independent Jewish

homeland. We contacted the professor's family and explained that we were interested in documenting her contributions to the Zionist movement and establishment of Israel. The family responded positively, and we will eventually review her papers. In addition to Zionist materials, a member of the university archives team will review whatever exists in the way of documentation on Yale University. We will not take any materials related to her research.

We also have used the policy to guide us when we are offered collections of material. When the wife of a deceased professor of psychiatry contacted us about his papers, we reviewed his career and determined that his influence did not extend outside of his profession. We explained to her that his research and professional contributions were adequately captured in the published record. Because he had been at the university for almost four decades and had served on a number of committees, however, we asked her if we could review his papers on behalf of the university archives and select materials that documented Yale University history. She was receptive and allowed us to do so.

Despite the fact that the approach we developed to appraise faculty papers has been largely successful, it has also had its drawbacks. By focusing first on appraising records creators, we run the risk of missing collections whose potential value does not make itself apparent through this top-down analysis. This could be remedied by committing to perusing the actual records of every faculty member who offers their papers to us. While we will often pay these visits as a courtesy, they can be time consuming and the policy is set up partially to avoid site visits for each reactive offer.

The inverse situation can also be a problem: there are times when we actively solicit a collection from a faculty member whose actual records do not reflect the functions we hope to document. In the article we published four years ago about this project, we cited as a positive example of our proactive efforts the records of David Kessler, former commissioner of the United States Food and Drug Administration and, at that time, dean of the Yale Medical School. Dr. Kessler fit all of our criteria, as he had made a major impact in the field of public health while commissioner of the FDA, leading their successful efforts against the tobacco industry to get nicotine classified as a drug that can be regulated. He was very enthusiastic about donating his papers, but when we visited him to view the records, they turned out predominately to be the research files for the book he published describing his tenure as FDA commissioner. While there were a few valuable parts to the collection, most notably his speeches and the confidential interviews he conducted with tobacco industry informers, the vast majority of files consisted of materials he had culled from other sources. While we had hoped to get the insider perspective on the FDA fight with the tobacco industry, he offered copies of materials readily available elsewhere--in other words, precisely the kinds of documents we had decided we were no longer going to take. To compound the problem, he was very insistent on us taking his research materials and the fact that we had originally contacted him made it more difficult to negotiate with him, and we ultimately took much more material than we wanted.

In spite of potential drawbacks and the occasional instance when use of the policy has not produced the results we sought, overall it has been very helpful in collection development and provides a focus that we previously lacked in conversations with potential donors. We are able to explain our collecting criteria, and if there is a match, we concentrate the rest of the conversation on those materials in which we are most interested. If, for whatever the reason, we feel compelled to actually take materials that fall outside our areas of interest, we are able to explain to the donor that we will only do minimal arrangement and description of them because our processing resources will be concentrated on the rest of the collection. Donors seem to readily understand and this approach to discussing the whys of materials and the work that will be done to them has also been successful with other donors.

Finally, when a faculty papers collection in the backlog is assigned for processing, we apply our policy to determine the work we will do. If there are materials in it that relate to an impact s/he had on the world outside of academia in a high-interest area for us, or there are the kinds of extraordinary research materials deemed important in our policy, we will devote most of our processing resources to arranging and describing those materials. If there are materials that document teaching or university administrative activities, and the university archives team designates them as worth retaining, they will receive the same amount of processing resources. The remainder of the collection is either separated out, or processed only minimally. In processing the papers of a professor well known for his scholarly work in Old English, for example, we first determined that his influence did not extend beyond his academic field. As a result, we concentrated on arranging and describing those materials that documented his work as secretary of his Yale College class and the various syllabi, class outlines, and

reading lists from the classes he taught, because they fit the criteria established by the university archives. We arranged and described in very minimal fashion the remaining ninety percent of the collection, which was comprised of research materials.

We are pleased with the path the Minnesota Method led us down and the policy we have put into place. Although we did not follow the method to the letter, many of its principles worked. Chief among them was that tying the prioritization of records creators to levels of documentation proved remarkably useful. Also, the process by which the MM employed macro appraisal strategy pushed us to first consider the records creator before the records themselves. As a result, we no longer deem it necessary to review the actual records from every offer we receive. While theoretically we would not have needed the integrated appraisal strategies of the method to lead us down this path, the MHS archivists provided a practical implementation of appraisal theory that focused on the problems faced by most manuscript repositories. The proactive nature of the method has also helped us to evaluate individuals earlier in their careers. We are only in the first stages of negotiation with several of these faculty members, but we are hopeful that early intervention will cause them to keep the types of records in which we are interested. This aspect of the method proves particularly useful in the current age of electronic records, when early intervention may be the only way to prevent record formats from becoming obsolete.

Other academic repositories can draw on our experience and conclusions. Taking into account local variations, they should be able to develop policies suitable to their own institutions. Non-academic collecting repositories can also draw on our experiences, if they have a defined topic or user constituency they want to document more precisely. With a policy now in place, we know what we want to collect and from whom and we understand the rationale. There will always be exceptions due to political considerations, but they will be just that, exceptions.

Stepping back, this project has provided us with important insight into the far-reaching impact that grappling with appraisal can have on archival work. Traditionally there have been lines drawn between the core archival functions found within American manuscript repositories. Collection development; appraisal, arrangement, and description; and reference are each the subject of theoretical approaches that often reinforce those lines and the separateness of each function. Our experience in developing and utilizing a policy for collecting faculty papers has led us in the opposite direction. Although specifically targeted at the initial selection of papers, the policy also ended up establishing for us principles that govern how we actually process collections. Those principles, in turn, influence both the materials and inventories we make available to researchers and hence the theoretical underpinnings of the reference services we provide. To come full circle from where we began this paper, by engaging with the theorists in one area, to our benefit we ended up developing or revising policies – or theories – in multiple areas. The process we went through reinforced the maxim that appraisal is the most important function in which archivists engage, but not just because it determines what will end up being preserved for posterity. It can also have a determining influence on how we make available what we choose to save. We believe that in the future, American appraisal theory, and those who engage with it on a practical basis, should focus on this blurring of lines between archival functions. By doing so, the usefulness of the theories and their applicability to real-life situations will be fully realized.

¹ *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records: National Archives Bulletin #8* (Washington: National Archives, 1956).

² Roberts, J.W. Archival theory: much ado about shelving. *The American Archivist* v. 50 (Winter 1987) p. 66-74.

³ Boles, Frank. *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*. Revised Version - pre-publication copy reviewed by authors.

⁴ Maynard Brichford, "University Archives: Relationships with Faculty," printed in *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979), 33. Originally printed in *American Archivist* 34 (April 1971); Frances Fournier, "For They Would Gladly Learn and Gladly Teach" -- University Faculty and Their Papers: A Challenge for Archivists, *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992); Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993); Harley P. Holden, "The Collecting of Faculty Papers," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 19 (April 1971): 187-193. Frederick Honhart (see citation below) reported that this policy was still in effect in 1983, but it is unknown whether Harvard still adheres to these guidelines; Frederick Honhart, "The Solicitation, Appraisal, and Acquisition of Faculty Papers," *College and Research Libraries* (May 1983): 236-241.

⁵ Greene, Mark A. and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with an Attitude: A Pragmatists Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," in *The Records of American Business*, edited by James M. O'Toole (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997), 161-229.

⁶ Greene and Daniels-Howell, 203.

⁷ Subsequent to our project, the authors met with the department head and the archives team to discuss how best to document teaching, both through official university records and through faculty papers. What emerged from the discussion were procedures for accessioning materials such as course catalogs, curriculum committee minutes, syllabi, lecture notes, reading lists, student evaluations, and videotaped lecture series.