A STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF APPRAISAL DURING PROCESSING: A CASE STUDY WITH MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

RICHARD W. HITE
AND
DANIEL J. LINKE

ABSTRACT: Recently Robert Sink called upon archivists to share appraisal information as the means of developing an empirical appraisal theory. In this vein, grant staff at the Western Reserve Historical Society reviewed the quantity of materials removed during processing of 136 manuscript collections totalling almost 1,000 feet. The review revealed that while no particular subject category contained a preponderance of disposable material, the removal rate for individuals' collections was higher than for organizations' collections. This is the result of the focused nature of organizations, while individuals may collect and keep whatever catches their eye.

As stack areas fill with unprocessed manuscript acquisitions, many archivists are forced to face the issue of appraisal. Are these collections mother lodes of data waiting to be mined or simply mountains of paper taking up expensive storage space? The archivist consulting archival literature on the topic of appraisal would find little of immediate practical use.[1] The few practical examples of appraisal practice relate to institutional or government records—examples that often do not readily apply to manuscripts.[2] As Robert Sink recently noted, sharing case studies about appraisal is the first step to an enhanced understanding of "the black box" into which archivists regularly place their hands.[3] By sharing information on appraisal decisions and results, archivists will be able to find experiential guidance and new insights into decisions that keep unprocessed collections from becoming processed collections of dubious value. In this spirit this paper describes the experience of the staff of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in appraising almost 1,000 linear feet of manuscript collections.

Beginning in 1987, the WRHS changed longstanding institutional appraisal protocols. Prior to the 1960s, the WRHS library's manuscript collection consist-

ed mostly of nineteenth-century manuscript material. The only items removed from collections were duplicates. In the 1960s, the society instituted an aggressive acquisitions program that brought in a vast amount of material detailing almost every aspect of the twentieth-century growth of the metropolitan Cleveland community. This change in collecting emphasis was prompted by a recognition of the emerging interest in social history and the desire to document a broad spectrum of northeastern Ohio history.[4] The new acquisitions policy augmented the old; it did not supplant it. While nineteenth-century records and the papers of political leaders continued to be accessioned, they were joined by the records of community organizers, settlement houses, and labor unions. The new acquisition program was largely responsible for the acquisition of approximately 7,500 feet of material from its beginning until 1987, at which time 4,400 feet remained unprocessed.

The new collecting policy, however, was not accompanied by a change in appraisal policy. Twentieth-century collections were appraised according to policies instituted for nineteenth-century material; duplicates were usually the only items removed. Furthermore, in the rush to gather material, onsite appraisal was never done, except in the case of obvious duplication. Appraisal decisions would wait until processing, but the staff was unable to process the growing volume of accessions.[5] In 1987 the society received grants from the George Gund and Cleveland foundations of Cleveland to make usable the 4,400 foot backlog which then consisted of more than 800 collections ranging in size from a single item to 212 feet.[6] The backlog consisted almost entirely of twentieth-century collections.[7]

As part of this grant-funded processing project the society reevaluated its appraisal policy. Since WRHS began uniformly using deeds of gift in the late 1960s, donors understood, up front, that material might be removed from their collections.[8] The appraisal policy chosen by the staff was quite conservative. It focused on the removal of numerous record types deemed of little or no value. These included minor fiscal instruments such as canceled checks and bank statements, handwritten notes with no significant informational value (such as delineations of parking space or reminders of appointments), and newspaper clippings that had no relation to the subject of the collection. The appraisal policy also authorized the limited removal of correspondence. Previously, all letters were retained. The new policy permitted removal of "minor" correspondence such as thank you notes, payments received or dunning letters, general messages of greeting, and, in some cases, political congratulatory messages. Other material open for appraisal included preliminary drafts of papers or speeches. Unless the draft in question was a seminal work by a major literary or political figure, only the final draft was kept.[9] The conservative character of these criteria must be stressed. Furthermore, none of the enumerated items was automatically removed. Minor fiscal instruments, for example, *were* kept when no broader summaries of financial activity existed. The appraisal criteria and practices implemented by WRHS did not represent a novel approach to appraisal nor even use such common tactics as series level appraisal. In many ways what was undertaken was simply an item weeding of the collections rather than a more comprehensive review of the material.[10]

The supervisory staff, having the benefit of long-term employment at the society, had accessioned nearly all of the collections acquired over the previous

twenty years. They knew the acquisitions, having boxed and transported them, and realized that some records were not worthy of retention. The curator of manuscripts, operating on intuition, estimated that approximately one-third of the material could be removed. In preparing the grant application, he estimated a removal rate of thirty percent.[11]

In the first eighteen months after the criteria's implementation, the application by staff of the new appraisal policy resulted in a reduction rate that exceeded the projected 30 percent. Two staff members processed 136 collections totalling 992.6 feet, with a 45 percent reduction in total volume. In achieving this result, the staff became aware that the reduction rates for some types of collections were greater than for others. For the sake of analysis, the authors divided the collections into seven categories which loosely reflected the society's manuscript collecting priorities: 1) Social Welfare and Reform, 2) Political, 3) Ethnic, 4) Business, 5) Church and Religion, 6) Genealogical and Family, and 7) Miscellaneous. Although the categories are not mutually exclusive, the choice of where to place a collection that fell into overlapping categories was determined by either the society's rationale for collecting the records or the predominance of the materials found within the collection. For example, church records that included vital statistics were placed under the church category despite their obvious value to genealogists. Because of the processors' inability to read the various languages in ethnic collections, the new appraisal standards were not applied to them. Instead these collections were appraised by the previous standards (removing only duplicates). Their appraisal rates are not included in this analysis, reducing the number of categories examined to six.

The results of the new appraisal policy, reported by category (see fig. 1), broke down as follows: social welfare and reform, 29 collections, 495.1 linear feet (188.9 removed); political, 14 collections, 297.1 linear feet (180.1 removed); business, 20 collections, 34 linear feet, (16.5 removed); church and religion, 10 collections, 43 linear feet (12.6 removed); genealogical and family, 24 collections, 62.1 linear feet (28.8 removed); and the miscellaneous category, 9 collections, 15 linear feet (7.9 removed). (The 30 ethnic collections accounted for 46.3 linear feet of which 14.5 feet, or 31 percent, was removed.)

The greatest reduction rate was achieved in political collections (61%), while the smallest came in the records of church and religious groups (29%). The next lowest reduction rate occurred in social welfare and reform (38%). Falling in the middle were the genealogy/family (46%), business (48%), and the miscellaneous group (52%). Within each category, reduction rates for individual collections varied widely. For example, some social welfare and reform collections were not reduced at all, while others were reduced by more than 50 percent. There were similar variations in other categories. This suggested a closer review.

At WRHS the quantity of material removed related most strongly to whether the material was produced as a consequence of individual action or the organic functions of an institutional bureaucracy. Material accumulated by an individual, whether as a private citizen or as a semi-autonomous member of a bureaucratic structure, was more reducible than general organizational records. Fifty-eight percent of personal papers collections were reduced by 50 percent or more, while only 35 percent of organizational records achieved this reduction rate.

To further understand this individual/organization dichotomy, it is useful to look more closely at the subject categories presented above. Within these categories, only political collections, with the highest reduction rate at 61 percent, consisted almost solely of the papers of individuals. Often twentieth-century political collections are the records of the politician's staff, which do not qualify as personal records. At WRHS, however, the political collections arranged by the grant project staff were, in fact, exclusively personal records collected from the politicians' homes, rather than their offices. These political collections contained large quantities of the types of material that the appraisal policy directed the processing staff to eliminate. Routine correspondence, scribbled notes, and drafts of speeches and position papers abounded. In some cases there were also newspaper clippings relating to any topic in which the politician happened to be interested. Thus, the new appraisal standards allowed for a drastic reduction in the size of these collections.

Not so drastically reduced were collections categorized as Genealogical/Family, Business, and the Miscellaneous group, which represented a fair mixture of material produced both by individuals or corporate entities. Their collective average reduction rate of 48 percent falls firmly into the middle ground. None of the collections in these categories contained the amount of routine correspondence found in the political collections, but genealogical/family collections were stocked with uncompiled research notes and drafts of family tree charts. The most common removal from business collections was minor fiscal instruments such as canceled checks and receipts. Some trivial correspondence was also found in the business collections, but not nearly as much as in political collections. This may seem surprising but most of the business collections pro-

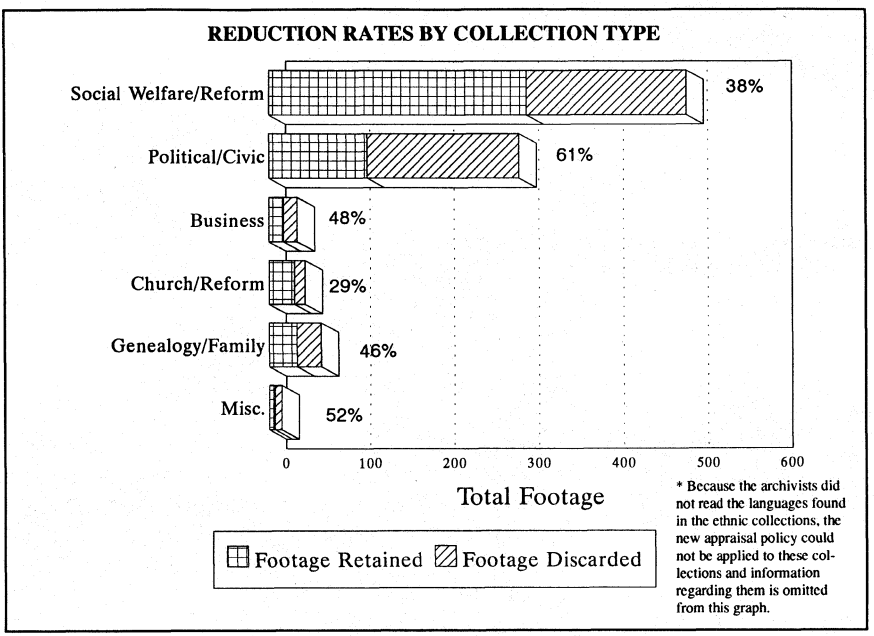

Figure 1

cessed predated the technology that aids in the production of much routine correspondence.[12]

The remaining two categories, Church and Religion, and Social Welfare and Reform represented largely institutional records and the respective reduction rates of 29 and 38 percent fall at the low end of the scale. Minor fiscal instruments and routine correspondence, particularly routine membership letters, were the items most frequently removed from these collections, but they were not present in quantities as large as in the papers of individuals.

Individuals' papers were reduced by an average of 64 percent, organizational records by an average of 35 percent (see fig. 2).[13] The papers of individuals often contain materials that were completely unrelated to the main focus of a person's activities which had formed the raison d'être for the collection's solicitation.[14] Naturally, material irrelevant to the society's initial reason for acquiring the collection would not be discarded, if in some other way it was pertinent to WRHS's mission in preserving the history of northeastern Ohio.

Reductions in organization records at WRHS were, on the other hand, largely dependent on the removal of duplicate items. Duplication is far more common in organizational records than in the papers of individuals. This is particularly true for organizational records generated since the 1960s, when electrostatic copying machines became commonplace items in most offices. These machines made it possible for all staff members to have copies of printed or manuscript items, and copies of an item often find their way into the organization's records. WRHS processors, however, did not find nearly as much unwanted material in organizational records as in individual papers. When such material was found, it was usually similar to the unwanted materials found in individual papers, but in

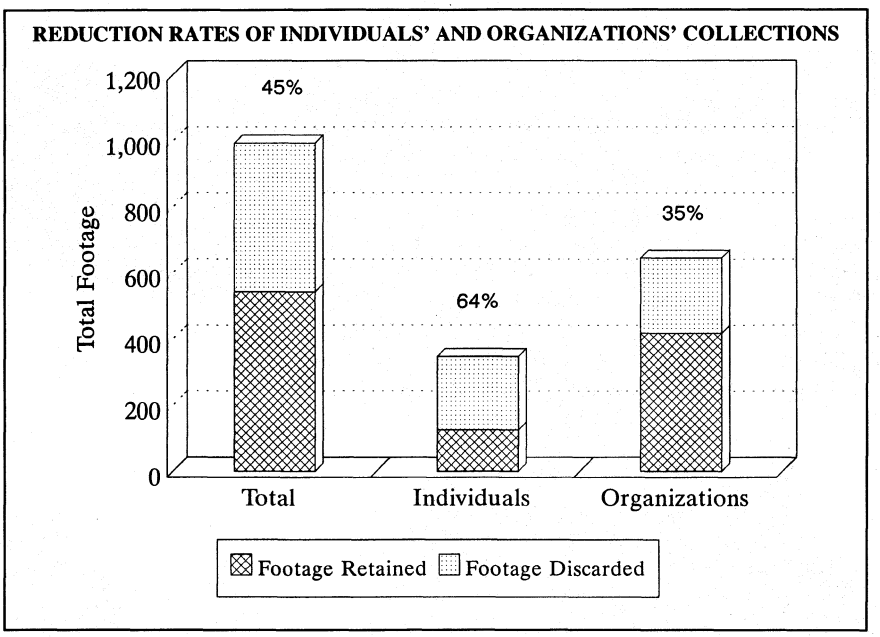

Figure 2

smaller quantities. Undesirable material most often found in organizational collections included detailed financial records such as receipts, bank reconciliations, and invoices. Only summary audits and journals were kept.

The WRHS grant project staff discovered one major fact about the appraisal of manuscripts collections during processing: total removal rates were higher for individual collections than for organizational records. This observation by itself will not revolutionize appraisal theory—it may not even be widely supported—but it may help build an empirical understanding of what our profession does, and thereby shed some light into the dark corners of manuscript appraisal.

Any approach to appraisal should be based on concrete examples if archivists are to avoid charges that their profession lacks an empirical base to support archival theory—charges which should be taken seriously. Critics such as John W. Roberts can be ignored or even sardonically refuted by the archival profession but they legitimately note the lack of solid evidence to support many archival beliefs.[15] Archivists should use statistics to support their ideas in the same way that many historians use quantitative methods to buttress their hypotheses on various historical issues. Such methods may, of course, either prove or undermine long accepted beliefs just as they have done in historical and other social science studies. In the area of appraisal, if repositories compiled records of removal rates and analyzed their data, then found appropriate venues to disseminate their findings, it would be a step toward an empirical approach to appraisal. Whether or not the WRHS experience proves to be the exception or the rule, comparisons of appraisal statistics compiled by other repositories will provide valuable insight into the "black box."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Richard W. Hite continued to work on various arrangement and description projects at the Western Reserve Historical Society until the fall of 1992, when he accepted a position as project archivist for the Papers of Admiral Richard Byrd at The Ohio State University Archives. He is also pursuing a Ph.D. in history at Kent State University.

Daniel J. Linke was an NHPRC Fellow at the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma after leaving the Western Reserve Historical Society. He now is employed at the New York State Archives and Records Administration.

The authors would like to thank John J. Grabowski, Barri Oyler Stith, and Jennifer McCormick for their assistance.

NOTES

1. Julia Marks Young, "Annotated Bibliography on Appraisal," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 190-216. She lists 128 works that discuss appraisal, few of which are based on actual appraisal studies.
2. David Levine, "The Appraisal Policy of the Ohio State Archives," *American Archivist* 47 (Summer 1984): 291-3; and Paul I. Chestnut, "Appraising the Papers of State Legislators," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 159-72.

3. Robert Sink, "Appraisal: The Process of Choice," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 452-8; and Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 121-40. In the Boles/Young article, the two took great pains to make apparent the many appraisal decisions facing an archivist, and in the process deftly appropriated "the black box" phrase to describe archival decision-making concerning appraisal.
4. John J. Grabowski, "Fragments or Components: Theme Collecting in a Local Setting," *American Archivist* 48 (Summer 1985): 304-14.
5. Additionally, seminal works on collecting policy, such as Faye Phillips "Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 30-42, had yet to be published.
6. For more detailed information on the processing project, see the grant request submitted to the George Gund Foundation by the Western Reserve Historical Society, 15 August 1986, curator of manuscripts' files, Western Reserve Historical Society.
7. Earlier collections had been processed in preparation for publication of Kermit J. Pike, *A Guide to the Manuscripts and Archives of The Western Reserve Historical Society* (Cleveland: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1972).
8. For earlier acquisitions, gift deeds were used only if the donor wanted them.
9. In determining new appraisal standards, the society's staff consulted Maynard J. Brichford's *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977). Experience showed that within the context of a manuscripts repository such as the Western Reserve Historical Society, a wide variety of collections necessitated a wide variety of standards. Brichford, therefore, could only serve as a general starting point.
10. Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 149. Rapport's discussion of reasonable versus conceivable use and his differentiation between unique and important records closely resembles the appraisal method applied to item-level appraisal at WRHS.
11. This estimated reduction rate included space savings through neat reboxing and removal of three dimensional items and published materials as well as duplicates and unwanted manuscript items.
12. Most business collections predated World War II, and many were either small collections, or from defunct businesses, or both.
13. The linear footage of the collections constituting the individuals' category totalled 346.7 feet, of which 221.1 was removed, while the organizations' collections totalled 645.9 linear feet, with 228.1 feet removed.
14. The worst case of unwanted and irrelevant materials in a collection found at WRHS was the papers of a local politician. These papers included multiple copies of unpublished book manuscripts, notes for these books, and voluminous newspaper clippings on any topic in which the politician happened to be interested. Such items typify the kinds of material that WRHS decided not to retain and their removal from this collection resulted in a reduction from 61 linear feet to 5.6 linear feet.
15. John W. Roberts, "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality," *American Archivist* 53 (Winter 1990): 110-20.