

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR ARCHIVAL
DONORS AND REPOSITORIES**
© Tawny Ryan Nelb 2013

1

The collaboration between donors and repositories is what makes historical archives possible, and assessing this relationship and the long term value of the materials is a major part of archival work. Archivist Terry Cook, of the University of Manitoba, wrote in 1999, “We are deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not. In this act of creation, we must remain extraordinarily sensitive to the political, social, and philosophical nature of documents individually, of archives collectively, of archival functions, of archivists’ personal bias, and most especially of archival appraisal, for that process defines the creators, functions, and activities to be reflected in archives, by defining, choosing, selecting which related documents are to be preserved permanently, and thus are to enjoy all subsequent archival processes (description, conservation, exhibition, reference, etc.), and, as starkly, and with finality, which are destroyed, excluded from archives, forgotten from memory.”¹

As part of the collaboration that creates archives, a potential donor is encouraged to ask questions to determine the best fit for their material and to clarify their expectations. In turn, a potential repository should ask questions of the donor to help assess the resources in staff, space, archival supplies, and professional preservation costs required if they take in this material and whether this material is even worth keeping for posterity. Just because the records are old does not mean they have long-term value.

Questions a Donor Asks an Archival Repository

Why does the archives want the records? How does it fit with their collecting mission?

Are the records being used to document the work of others or as part of an entire body of records documenting the work of the record creator?

Is this repository the best location for the maximum number of researchers who may want to use the material? Who will be the users?

How is the archives funded, and is that funding source secure?

Do you have room to take in the collection immediately? If not, what arrangement would be made for off-site storage?

Does the repository offer a safe and secure environment with proper facilities? Does it have temperature and humidity controlled storage? Are the storage facilities clean and maintained? How will the material be

¹ Terry Cook, “Archival Appraisal and Collection: Issues, Challenge, New Approaches,” Special Lecture Series, University of Maryland and to NARA Staff, College Park, MD, April 21, 1999, <http://www.mybestdocs.com/cookt-nara-990421-2.htm>, accessed January 7, 2013.

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR ARCHIVAL
DONORS AND REPOSITORIES**
© Tawny Ryan Nelb 2013

2

cared for? What type of record housing will be used? Does the archives provide adequate space for researchers to use the records easily and do they apply appropriate registration and security measures to protect the materials during use? Do they follow best practices according to the standards of the Society of American Archivists?

How will the material be catalogued? Will access information be available only at the repository? Will information about the records be readily available through a national data base or on-line through web-based access?

What other archival collections are in the archives that might complement the research use your papers?

Are the papers from other donors arranged in an understandable order and the inventories clear?

How long will the records be “closed” or unavailable to researchers as they undergo processing (arrangement, description, preservation housing)? What is the processing backlog? Have your records been given a reasonable priority?

What is the commitment to the donor to let them use their own records at the repository even if they will not be processed or arranged for a few years?

Have you clarified record ownership by having a deed of gift with the repository? What about copyright? Will copyright and reproduction rights be signed over to the archives in the deed of gift?

Questions a Repository Asks a Donor Before Accepting their Papers or Considers as a Part of Appraisal

What is the provenance or record of the history of ownership of the records?

What is the size of the collection in linear feet (straight line measurement of how much space it takes up on a shelf)?

How is the material arranged? Is this the creation order or one that was imposed later?

What access tools already exist? Are there inventories?

**IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR ARCHIVAL
DONORS AND REPOSITORIES**

3

© Tawny Ryan Nelb 2013

Are there any formats that pose storage or preservation challenges (oversized, odd sizes, or fugitive digital media)?

Does the donor own the copyright?

Do these records fit with our collecting policy?

Will you want a tax deduction for the gift of the materials? If so, have you had the material appraised by an accredited appraiser? Due to IRS restrictions, the archival repository can provide a list of appraisers but cannot pay for the appraisal.

Why do these records have continuing informational or evidentiary value regarding the donor, the creator, or the subject matter?

Will the donor impose any restrictions on use? Although restrictions are rarely encouraged, limited restrictions to protect the privacy of individuals may be imposed after discussion with the repository.

Will there be a monetary donation to the repository to help pay the costs of preservation, re-housing, and cataloging?

Who will pay the cost of shipping the material to the archives?

What is the physical condition of the material? What extraordinary cost would be incurred by the repository to preserve the material?

If only a portion of the creator's personal papers are being given to the archives, what will happen to the remaining material? Will it be donated to the archives at a later date? Will it go to a different repository?

Do you understand that a deed of gift, usually required for most donations, turns over both physical ownership and the material's copyright to the archival repository?

**©Tawny Ryan Nelb 2013
Nelb Archival Consulting, Inc.
5610 Woodberry Ct.
Midland, MI 48640-6929
989-631-1011
www.nelbarchival.com
tawnynelb@gmail.com**