

MODULE 14

APPRAISING DIGITAL RECORDS

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Case Study 2: Imaginative Digital Appraisal in a Small Institution

This small midwestern college has an archives much like that of other similar institutions: one full-time archivist, a smattering of part-time and short-term staff, and severely limited resources. In the face of these challenges, the archivist tackles digital appraisal imaginatively and effectively.

The college's records management policy, which defines the functions of the archives, declares that the archives will not accept digital records. The policy is now outdated, and a team will soon be set up to revise it. The college's new archivist, however, has decided she must quietly ignore that policy rather than wait any longer. She has realized that if she does not begin to appraise and accession digital records now, she will face an ever-widening black hole that has already left the archives with no photographs from the college photographer for the last ten years and no correspondence from the college's last president.

Her first move, instead of formal appraisal, was triage. She quickly identified archival records that were most likely to disappear in the future. These included records not under the umbrella of the college library, records of faculty and administrators who were about to leave the college, and ephemeral records. The last guided her to her most ingenious solution. After becoming the archivist at her college, she discovered that the archives was very focused on documenting the administration and virtually not at all on student life. Because of this, the archives' holdings could not help her address the frequent reference requests she received about students and their interests. Beyond the student newspaper, there was little to give a researcher a sense of the student body across time, so she looked for ways to diversify the student perspective. She discovered that an anonymous social media platform was popular on campus, so she lurks on this venue watching for responses to changes in college rules, thoughts about campus life, and (in one case) responses to the sudden death of a student on campus. She monitors relevant postings from this platform on a daily basis, and she has found it to be a good source for documenting the student perspective. This is an imperfect solution; because the postings to this venue are ephemeral and disappear quickly, she cannot catch every relevant posting. From an appraisal perspective, however, this is functional analysis. She has identified an important function of the

campus that is only thinly documented, and she has found the records to document that function.

She also has looked to the files that have the most significant risk of corruption to identify those that are archival. She has reviewed records stored on flash drives, CDs, and other removable media, because she knew that records stored in this manner are usually all but abandoned by their creators. She has also discovered that some faculty and staff are storing records on shared network drives under the assumption that the records are archived forever, even though many of these drives are marked for destruction. She has found some valuable records, though a number of them exhibit corrupted metadata and formatting, and has perfected the art of being an embedded archivist. She is living within the world of the campus, learning how digital records are created and managed, and finding opportunities to preserve neglected records. She is practicing the art of appraisal just ahead of disappearance.

In the case of records that have already been identified as archival, she is ensuring that the records of the recent past and the present are not lost. The only copies of twelve years of board of trustees records are stored electronically within a course management system, along with course proposals and faculty senate minutes. After gaining access to this system, she began to download the files from that system to ensure they are not lost. She is also using a Web crawler to capture the college's website and has set up automatic processes in her official Google Mail account to save those administrative emails that best document the college. In an extension of NARA's Capstone system, she has also begun to capture the president's Twitter feed. She has even proposed set schedules at which college offices must transfer digital archival records to the archives. But the challenges continue. For instance, the college communications office holds terabytes of essential records in an expensive software program accessible only on one person's computer, and the college does not have a digital asset management system to transfer those records to. In the face of all of these issues, demonstrating ingenuity and determination, the archivist continues to develop buy-in and advocate for the needs of the archives and the college.