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Records Management and the Walking Archivist

Patricia Bartkowski

William Benedon, Corporate Director of Lockheed Aircraft Corporation for Records Management, and former President of the American Records Management Association, defines "records management" as: "The direction of a program designed to provide economy and efficiency in the creation, organization, maintenance, use and retrieval, and disposition of records, assuring that needless records will not be created or kept and valuable records will be preserved and available."[1] Implicit in this definition are concepts, functions, facilities, and materials ranging from correspondence, forms and reports management to equipment surveillance, filing system control, inventories, microform applications, records centers, records managers, retention and disposal schedules, screening, searches, storage density, and vital records control and audit.

A cursory glance at records management seems to indicate that it is not within the purview of the archivist. A closer examination, however, reveals otherwise. Today's current valuable records will be tomorrow's archives. The records manager's main concern with current records is economy and efficiency, whereas the archivist's is the identification and protection of valuable records before arrival at the archives. The archivist's involvement in records management also can help prevent the archives from being a dumping ground for unwanted records of questionable value. As Frank B. Evans has written, "The interest of the archivist in records management is therefore not only legitimate—it is essential."[2]

Implementing a records management program consistent with Benedon's definition is not feasible for many institutions. Constructing, or even renovating, a building to make it suitable for a records center can be costly. Additional staff salaries also must be considered. A university archives, like most archives, is faced with budget, staff, and space constraints. Its primary concern is collecting, arranging and preserving material, preparing finding aids and giving reference service. Within this framework, records management becomes one facet of the archives program.

Consider the case of two individuals in Macon who want to reach Atlanta, but for different reasons. Airplane, car and bus are the conventional means of transportation. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but each will allow the individuals to realize the goal of reaching Atlanta. Assume for whatever reason—lack of funds, expired driver's license—that one of the two cannot use these conventional methods. Does this necessarily mean that the goal must be sacrificed? No. One can walk to Atlanta. Admittedly more time and effort must be expended, but in taking the first step, no matter how small a step, progress has been made. This paper is intended for the walking archivist—that is to say, the archivist who must be both archivist and records manager, the archivist without the conventional records center, and the archivist, recalling Benedon's definition, who implements a program designed to assure that needless records will not be kept and valuable records will be preserved and available.

The walking archivist's first step can be to standardize transmittal of material to the archives. Records arriving in a variety of containers present an archives, expecially one where space is a critical factor, with several problems. Non-uniform containers prevent maximum storage density. Their size may prohibit their shelving and force stacking on floors. Boxes of different dimensions may not stack easily, or withstand the weight of other boxes, thus causing damage to records. Tall stacks may topple and cause injury to employees. Larger containers, such as transfile and bankers boxes, are usually too heavy for easy lifting by one person. To alleviate these problems, it is preferable to use the standard records center container, with dimensions of 10×12×15 inches, which can be used for either letter or legal size files.[3] Further, if the archives will supply offices with records center containers, it will save itself from the time-consuming necessity of transferring records into appropriate boxes. This standardization of containers can increase storage density as well as save the archivist's back.

The next step is to answer the question: "What's in the box?" Anyone who has searched ten or fifteen linear feet of uninventoried records knows that answering this question can be tedious and frustrating. The recourse is to secure a folder title inventory. Of course it takes time to

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[1]William Benedon, *Records Management* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 258.

[2]Frank B. Evans, "Archivists and Records Managers: Variations on a Theme," *American Archivist*, 30 (January, 1967), 58. See also Gerald F. Brown, "The Archivist and the Records Manager: A Records Manager's Viewpoint," *Records Management Quarterly*, 5 (January, 1971), 21-22, 38; and R. A. Shiff, "The Archivist's Role in Records Management," *American Archivist*, 19 (April, 1956), 111-120.

[3]For a discussion of containers and shelving, see Patricia Bartkowski and William Saffady, "Shelving and Office Furniture for Archives Buildings," *American Archivist*, 37 (January, 1974), 55-66.

prepare an inventory—time that the archivist could put to better use for other activities. An alternative is to have the sending office prepare the inventory. The archivist can explain quite positively that the archives has thousands of files, and for the archives to give the office the type of reference service that it needs and expects, a folder title inventory is necessary. Convince the office of this fact, and most of the time the office will provide an inventory.

To increase the likelihood of receiving the desired inventory and transmittal information, the archives should provide offices with a combined transmittal inventory form (fig. 1). Such a form secures the name and address of the office, signature of administrative official, name and phone number of person preparing the shipment, folder titles keyed to box and folder numbers, and access restrictions. To this information the archivist adds an accession number, date of receipt, name of record group into which the material fits, if different from the name of the office, and, finally, destroy date where applicable. When completed, the original copy is maintained in the archives and the carbon forwarded to the office.

At times offices may need information from, copies of, or temporary physical return of, records. Requests for reference service may be made by telephone or in writing, but the archives should record the transaction on a request for reference service form (fig. 2). The form serves the archives by impressing upon offices the value of an inventory, while helping to establish a systematic reference procedure. It will indicate the type of service needed—copies of records, information from records or return of records—as well as accession, box and folder number, folder title, name and address of office, name and title of requester, date, any specific instructions, and the signature of a person in the office authorized to obtain the files. One copy of the reference service form should accompany the records from the archives to the requesting office and back. This ensures that upon their return the records will be replaced in their proper location with a minimum of time and effort expended by the archivist. The office copy should be dated and attached to the archives copy to indicate that the records have been returned. Reference service forms provide a record of telephone and written requests, document the types of services given, record which offices are using the archives and how often, and indicate which records are out and which have been returned to the archives. Consequently the forms can be a convenient tool when compiling annual reports and usage studies.

Standardized transmittal and reference procedures are basic to an archives' records management program. To comply with these procedures, however, offices need to know that such procedures exist. Too often the archivist overlooks or dismisses this need, as well as the educational function of communication. The archives can inform offices about

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY
ARCHIVES
RECORDS TRANSMITTAL AND INVENTORY SHEET

NOTE: PLEASE FILL OUT THIS FORM IN DUPLICATE. SEND THE ORIGINAL TO THE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES. RETAIN THE DUPLICATE FOR YOUR OFFICE FILES.	FOR ARCHIVES OFFICE USE ONLY 1. ACCESSION NUMBER
5. NAME OF TRANSMITTING OFFICE	2. DATE RECEIVED
6. ADDRESS OF TRANSMITTING OFFICE	3. RECORD GROUP
7. PERSON PREPARING SHIPMENT TELEPHONE	4. RECEIVED BY (SIGNATURE)

INVENTORY OF RECORDS

8. BOX NO	9. FOLDER NO.	10. FILE FOLDER TITLE	11. DESTROY AFTER	12. DATE DESTROYED

COLLEGE
DEPT./DIVISION

RESTRICTIONS ON USE OF RECORDS: (IF NO RESTRICTIONS, WRITE "NONE")

FORM 10-462 5C (12-72)

ARCHIVES COPY

Figure 1.

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY
ARCHIVES
REQUEST FOR REFERENCE SERVICE

TYPE OF SERVICE REQUESTED (PLEASE CHECK ONE ONLY)

☐ COPIES OF RECORDS ☐ INFORMATION FROM RECORDS ☐ RETURN OF RECORDS

RECORDS OF INFORMATION REQUESTED

ACCESSION NO.	BOX NO.	FOLDER NO.	FILE FOLDER TITLE OR DESCRIPTION

COLLEGE ______ DEPT./DIVISION ______

REMARKS

NAME OF ORIGINATING OFFICE ADDRESS OF ORIGINATING OFFICE

NAME OF AUTHORIZED REQUESTER TITLE DATE

RECEIPT FOR RECORDS RETURNED TO ORIGINATING OFFICE

IF RECORDS ARE TO BE RETURNED TO THE ORIGINATING OFFICE, PLEASE SIGN BELOW AND RETURN FORM TO THE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES IMMEDIATELY.

AUTHORIZED SIGNATURE TITLE CAMPUS EXTENSION DATE

FORM 10-464 1M (2-81) ARCHIVES COPY

Figure 2.

records management activities through memos, flyers, presentations, brochures and pamphlets. Each has advantages. Memos and flyers are inexpensive; presentations allow personal contact; brochures and pamphlets are attractive and may be more detailed. Whatever format is used, the following points should be emphasized: 1) offices will realize monetary savings since space is money; 2) offices are assured of quick retrieval of records or information from records when needed; 3) not all inactive records belong in the archives; 4) records of permanent value will be preserved. Since most offices are not concerned that records of permanent value be preserved, major emphasis should be placed on space savings and reference services.

Approximately two and one half years ago, when shelving requirements were being drafted for the proposed Walter P. Reuther Library building, the staff of the Wayne State University Archives reviewed its transmittal and reference procedures. It found 1) a reference service often unnecessarily time consuming and inefficient, 2) a considerable backlog of uninventoried, odd-size boxes, and 3) storage space rapidly diminishing. Changes, the survey concluded, were required.

The archives set its first goal as having records inventoried and housed in records center containers before deposit in the repository. Under the new procedure, offices wishing to transfer records are supplied with appropriate boxes, and a newly-designed combined Records Transmittal and Inventory form. Secondly, to facilitate and document reference activities, a Request for Reference Service form was created. Both forms have proved highly serviceable.

At this point the archives decided that it was desirable not only to inform the university at large of our new procedures, but also to reiterate the archives' existence. Frankly, it was hoped offices could be enticed into becoming involved in the records management program rather than resorting to the indiscriminate destruction of records. After careful consideration of methods of communication, costs, and expected results, the repository chose to produce a handbook. The handbook,[4] along with a covering memorandum from the executive vice president, was mailed to all executive officers, deans, directors, and department chairmen. It generated interest, fostered cooperation and gave visibility to the archives. Surely the handbook did not solve all of the problems, but our experience with it confirms that publications play a vital role in the success or failure of an archives' records management program.

When record accumulations threaten to evict university office personnel, the archives usually is called. In this crisis situation the office's primary concern is to gain space by ridding itself of records. The archi-

[4]Patricia Bartkowski and William Saffady, *Managing Inactive Records* (Records Management Handbook 1; Detroit: Wayne State University Archives, 1973), 20 pp.

vist easily can remove those records which should be kept permanently and earmark for destruction those which should not. This crisis situation presents the archivist also with the opportunity to promote other records management activities. Adopting a systematic procedure for the disposition of inactive records helps prevent future chaos and similar crises, alleviates space and filing difficulties, and promotes efficiency. In short, sell the offices on the concept of records retention and disposal schedules.

To establish schedules, the archivist must first gather data. What is the function and organization of the office? Where is the office located in the organizational structure of the university? Which are the general administrative policy records, the operational records, and the housekeeping records? What is the quantity? Where and how are the files housed? Do other offices have similar records? Who is responsible for maintaining the records?

Directories, organizational charts, and consultations with office personnel are helpful in answering these questions. Professional literature such as *Records Management Quarterly*, *Information and Records Management* and *The American Archivist* provide necessary background information. Considering that there are approximately nine hundred state and federal regulations concerning the disposition of records,[5] it is essential to establish a good rapport with the university attorney.

Even within an institution that has a formal policy regarding the disposition of inactive records, an archives often must pursue a course of tactful diplomacy to elicit cooperation. Coercion to compel compliance may be political and fiscal suicide for an archives. Then too, acquisition of the personal papers of faculty members is dependent upon their cooperation and interest. Within a university, the business, student and personnel records offices are usually most receptive to records management activities, while departmental and administrative offices quite often are reluctant to accept them. From an archival perspective, records from the latter offices, in particular policy records, are generally the most valuable. Establishing retention and disposal schedules requires careful work with both records and office personnel. Where Teddy Roosevelt could "Speak softly and carry a big stick," the walking archivist must speak softly and carry a records center container.

Space is usually at a premium in an archives' records management facility, and priority should be given to records of an archival nature. To accept records routinely for temporary storage should be the exception

[5]Electric Wastebasket Corporation, *Records Retention Timetable* (145 West Street, New York, 10036, 1974), 8 pp. William F. Schmidt and Sarah F. Wilson, "A Practical Approach to University Records Management," *American Archivist*, 31 (July, 1968), 247-264, suggest retention and disposal guidelines for specific university records.

rather than the rule. Semi-inactive records, or those that have a high retrieval rate, should be retained in offices until they become inactive. One way of determining the status of records is to ask "How often have these records been referenced in the past year?" If the answer is once or twice, the records may be considered inactive. As a rule of thumb, most departmental and administrative records generally become inactive after three years.

The archivist is vitally concerned with ease of access and maximum efficiency in retrieving records and information from files in the archives. There should be a similar concern for records outside the archives. An institution runs on its files. Unless information can be retrieved, for all practical purposes it is lost. Yet filing is often relegated to the least experienced member of the office staff, without special instruction or even the simplest orientation to the work of the office. Although alphabetic files are the most common, some individuals create their own filing system. With two or three individuals filing and with turnover in clerical personnel, it is not unusual to have several systems operating at the same time. Retrieval becomes time-consuming, inefficient, and highly distasteful. To help alleviate these difficulties at Wayne State University, the archives staff designed and is gradually implementing a university-wide subject filing system. A handbook publication again is being used to disseminate the system.[6]

The archivist-records manager must realize that offices will participate in records management activities in varying degrees. Some will contact the archives only in a crisis situation. At the same time, they will reject retention and disposal schedules, files revision, and any other services available. Others desire all assistance that can be given. It must be realized also that archives differ and consequently will place emphasis on different records management activities. Because of staff, budget, and space constraints, most archives cannot have a sophisticated, well-developed records management program. But if the archivist is truly concerned with the preservation of records and the quality of records that are preserved, there must be an involvement in records management. It is only when the archivist takes the first step that he or she becomes the walking archivist.

[6]Patricia Bartkowski and William Saffady, *A University Filing System* (Records Management Handbook 2; Detroit: Wayne State University Archives, 1973), 32 pp.