

January 1981

Pruning the Groves of Academe: Appraisal, Arrangement and Description of Faculty Papers

Mary E. Janzen
Chicago Historical Society

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Janzen, Mary E., "Pruning the Groves of Academe: Appraisal, Arrangement and Description of Faculty Papers," *Georgia Archive* 9 no. 2 (1981).

Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol9/iss2/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Archive by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Janzen: Pruning the Groves of Academe: Appraisal, Arrangement and Description
PRUNING THE GROVES OF ACADEME:
APPRAISAL, ARRANGEMENT
AND DESCRIPTION OF FACULTY PAPERS

Mary E. Janzen

In 1978, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission's Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories listed 380 college and university archives, many of which had been established since 1962. As a distinct category of archival institution, these archives are situated somewhere on the spectrum between traditional manuscript repositories and other governmental, organizational, and institutional archives. Most not only serve as custodians of the official records of their host institutions but also collect a broad range of non-official papers and records, some organically connected to the college or university and others having no direct relationship with that community.

Not coincidentally, the quarter-century following World War II also witnessed an exponential growth in both the size and number of institutions of higher learning in the United States. The total number of faculty at newly-established or greatly-expanded colleges and universities increased correspondingly, and now numbers over three-quarters of a million.

One consequence of this rapid increase in the number of college and university archival repositories and in the size of college and university faculties is that more papers of academicians are now being preserved than even before. Will the papers of academics ultimately come to be overrepresented in the nation's archival repositories? This question is unanswerable, but it underlines the fact that

appraisal of faculty papers. Like any other appraisal decision, is a dynamic process, one that changes with changing circumstances.

The appraisal criteria of an archivist who is establishing a college or university archives will differ from those of an archivist at a long-standing repository. Initially, the archivist at a newly-established repository may be inclined to acquire virtually every collection of faculty papers that becomes available. Initial acquisitions of papers, if of sufficiently prominent faculty and if properly publicized, can function as magnets to draw further accessions. The archivist can then refine standards as his or her knowledge of the institution grows and gaps in the archives' holdings become apparent. Established college and university archives must necessarily apply more rigorous appraisal standards because of limitations on available storage space.

Appraisal of faculty papers involves a number of questions. How do the papers exemplify the history of a particular university? What are their implications for the history of higher education in America? Do they reflect the development of an academic discipline? What information do they contain that might illuminate broader social phenomenon? In many cases--though not all--the answers to these questions will be related to the eminence of each faculty member. While it is certainly true that prominent academics can create very disappointing bodies of papers, acknowledged leaders in various disciplines are most likely to correspond with others of their rank and to be engaged with important issues of the day. This means that it would be advisable to preserve the papers of individuals such as John Dewey or Frederick Jackson Turner in their entirety as a service to researchers pursuing a wide variety of topics.

The process of appraisal, however, only begins with the identification of those faculty whose papers would be particularly appropriate for inclusion among a university archives' holdings. Appraisal is a continuous process which should be applied at every stage of arrangement and description. Once the papers are acquired, further questions should be posed. Which materials should be retained? Which can safely be discarded?

Faculty papers can be approached most profitably as a faculty member's personal archives. The best arrangement will take into account both the form of the documents and the functions carried out by the faculty member. Biographical materials and correspondence should be processed first, since they provide a chronological framework which will assist in appraising, arranging, and describing the remainder of the papers.

Biographical materials, in the form of vitae, bibliographies, entries prepared for Who's Who and other directories, award certificates, autobiographical writings, press releases, news clippings, and obituaries should be arranged in the first folders of the collection. Together with the biographical essay and scope and content note in the descriptive inventory, this kind of material provides the researcher with the best introduction to a collection.

The correspondence ordinarily will reflect the faculty member's role both in the college or university and in his or her discipline. It can help identify and date manuscripts, speeches, lecture notes, and other materials that comprise the remainder of the collection. In the absence of a useful original file order, correspondence has traditionally been arranged chronologically. However, an alphabetical arrangement by surname of incoming correspondent or subject may better serve many researchers, especially those primarily interested in the letters

of individuals other than the faculty member in whose papers they repose. A name and subject index to chronologically-arranged correspondence provides excellent access, but a complete index is very time-consuming to prepare, and a selective one can mislead the user.

The arrangement of the balance of a faculty member's papers will vary. Usually one finds a range of materials which reflects and documents an academic's multi-faceted role as teacher, author, scholar, administrator, committee member, participant in professional organizations, consultant, private citizen, and family member. Not every collection will include a full spectrum of such materials, nor do all types of material have to be preserved in every collection. Typically, faculty papers do not break down so neatly into discrete categories, since so many of an academic's functions are interrelated. As a general rule, a useable pre-existing arrangement should not be discarded in favor of artificial categories. In cases where personal, professional, and administrative papers are intermingled, distinctions which cannot be made through arrangement may be handled by the description, which should link related materials filed in different folders and boxes.

Certain common components of academics' papers may pose difficult appraisal problems. Bodies of official records of a college or university, for example, are often found among the personal papers of its faculty members. Official files of various college or university committees, traditionally maintained by the chair of the committee, are often retained as part of personal files. In many instances, even departmental records have been considered by a chairperson as his or her personal papers. Such files, if discrete and clearly identifiable, should be separated from a faculty member's papers and processed as official records. If they are intermingled with personal papers to a degree

Janzen, Pruning the Groves of Academia: Appraisal, Arrangement and Description
which makes it impractical to separate them, their presence should be noted in the description, and cross-references should be filed with descriptions of appropriate official records.

Teaching materials such as lecture notes, course outlines, syllabi, examination questions, grade books, and student papers comprise a category of papers whose value is often difficult to determine. Lecture notes in some instances reflect stages in the development of important ideas, whose evolution would remain unknown were it not for the preservation of these notes. Although most lecture notes which university archivists will encounter will not be of this caliber, their potential use as a source for intellectual history should not be overlooked.

Lecture notes, syllabi, examination questions, student papers, and notebooks may also provide evidence for the history of pedagogy. Historians of education have encountered difficulty in determining exactly what was taught in classrooms as recently as forty years ago. Course descriptions in catalogs are so skeletal that one is tempted to assign to them contemporary definitions and read into them current course contents. Of what value are student papers in this regard? Apart from interest in their content, student papers can contribute to the understanding of grading standards over a period of time, revealing changing concepts of superior, average, and unacceptable work. A sample might be separated from faculty papers and placed in a separate series arranged chronologically for each discipline.

Whether or not a particular body of teaching materials should be preserved may be determined by such factors as their volume, legibility, completeness, and physical condition as well as the reputation of the particular faculty member who produced

them. Essential duplication of content is another consideration. A university archives scarcely needs to retain six different sets of course materials for Introductory Economics.

Drafts of articles and books, ranging from rough notes through galley proof, are frequently found in faculty papers. How many sequential forms documenting the evolution of a faculty member's writings should be saved? For most faculty papers, this category of materials will be consulted infrequently. Hence, the degree of order and the completeness of drafts should be major factors in an appraisal decision. For well-ordered papers of not too great a bulk, it may be more expeditious to simply save all drafts than to attempt to compare different versions for significant changes. Of course, multiple carbons without corrections can be discarded.

Research files pose an especially difficult appraisal problem. An article written by Paul Lewinson in 1960 on the appraisal of files of government-sponsored research projects still offers some thought-provoking insights.¹ Lewinson's distinction between "administratively important" and "substantively important" research projects can be applied to faculty research files.

The "administratively important" project is one in which an individual or institution invested considerable time and money or which was related to a particularly urgent political or social concern of its time. For this type of project, Lewinson suggested preserving planning and administrative files, the report of the outcome (in published or manuscript form), and any critiques the project may have generated.

The second type of research project, he called "substantively important" because it either resulted

in some great intellectual break-through or produced data of continuing interest which was not fully exploited in the published report. Also included in this category would be important work that never appeared in published form due to the death of the principal investigator, loss of funding, security restrictions, etc. For "substantively important" projects, one might save the raw data as well as administrative file, publications, and critiques.

It was Lewinson's judgment that most research files maintained by historians, legal scholars, and experimental scientists may be discarded because the data they contain is usually adequately represented in the published outcome of their research. On the other hand, he regarded files of observational scientists such as geologists, meteorologists, explorers, and astronomers as having potential long-term value, since the events they record are non-repeatable. Long, unbroken runs of such data are of great interest to scientists, provided that the recording instruments used were sufficiently precise to enable them to be compared to more recent observations. Social scientists' files, particularly large-scale surveys and statistical studies which would be prohibitively expensive to repeat, often contain unexploited data. Hence, Lewinson recommended that they be considered for preservation even though the volume and the format of such files often pose serious problems.

Lewinson's rough guidelines will, however, be of only limited assistance in making a particular appraisal decision, and should be applied with caution. For example, an historian's notes from German archives that were subsequently destroyed during World War II are valuable primary sources and should be treated as such. Although clippings files pose serious conservation problems, they can be enormously useful, as any scholar who has become bleary-eyed examining unindexed newspapers on microfilm can attest. Observational

scientific data from the early years of the twentieth century may prove impossible to correlate with later data because of advances in instrumentation. Each set of research files therefore must be considered individually, taking into account the cost of processing and preserving them as well as the inherent value of whatever information they might contain.

Lewinson also recommended turning to subject specialists for assistance in the appraisal of research files. However, expert advice is not always available, and when it is, the subject expert cannot be expected to have knowledge of all the factors that enter into an appraisal decision, particularly of the costs of processing and preservation. Ultimately, university archivists are forced to rely upon their own ability to educate themselves in the subject matter of a variety of academic disciplines.

Some types of materials can be readily separated from faculty papers. For example, university publications and other informational materials that were widely reproduced and distributed should be culled from faculty papers and placed in a university publications series, accessed by office of origin. A broad definition of "university publications" encompassing all forms of duplicated materials created and distributed by university offices is most serviceable. Such material will be most accessible under this kind of archival control, and its removal will also contribute significantly to reducing the bulk of collections of faculty papers.

Typical collections of faculty papers also contain quantities of offprints of articles sent to the faculty member by colleagues and former students, as well as other extraneous printed materials. Unless heavily annotated or integrally-related to the contents of a particular file, these printed

items may be discarded or dispersed to other appropriate departments in the college or university library.

A final category of material which presents special appraisal problems is a faculty member's personal, or more properly, private papers. Private correspondence provides a richer, more complete portrait of the faculty member than can usually be drawn from his or her professional papers alone. Such correspondence can also provide information of value to scholars interested in the sociology of the professions, a topic of great current interest among historians. If possible, private correspondence should be solicited from prospective donors, although restrictions may be imposed on material that might be potentially embarrassing.

Similar considerations also apply to professional correspondence containing critical remarks about colleagues or students. In general archivists impose restrictions with great reluctance, but some restrictions may be necessary for limited periods. Such temporary restrictions are imposed not to suppress information, but to insure its survival as part of the record. In a close-knit academic community, serious damage may be done to the collecting program of the university archives if members of the faculty become convinced that leaks of comments made in confidence are emanating from users of faculty collections deposited in the archives.

Every day college and university archivists make appraisal decisions about faculty papers that will ultimately determine what kind of historical evidence of academic life in America will survive in archival repositories. What Frederick Rudolph wrote in 1962 is still largely true: "The history of the American college professor is waiting for the perceptive and sensitive student, someone who is prepared to search out the changing nature of his

recruitment and social origins, his social and economic status, and his social function and ... prepared to tell the story without losing sight of the professional life and human records it has built."² College and university archivists need to cooperate in developing appropriate guidelines for selecting, arranging, and preserving faculty papers for studies of such scope.

NOTES

¹Paul Lewinson, "Toward Accessioning Standards--Research Records," American Archivist 23 (1960): 297-310.

²Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University: A History. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962, p. 504.

³Adapted from a list prepared and distributed to faculty at Northwestern University by University Archivist Patrick M. Quinn.

Table 1
Documenting The Careers Of Faculty:
Materials Sought By
A College Or University Archives³

1. Biographical material: resumes, vitae, bibliographies, biographical and autobiographical sketches, chronologies, genealogies, newspaper clippings, biographical questionnaires and/or entries, memoirs, reviews of publications, financial records
2. Correspondence
 - a. Official: outgoing (copies and/or drafts) and incoming letters and memoranda generated in the course of conducting University business
 - b. Professional: outgoing and incoming correspondence with colleagues, publishers, professional societies, students, etc.
 - c. Personal: letters to and from friends, relatives, acquaintances and business contacts
3. Diaries, notebooks, appointment calendars, memorabilia
4. Class lecture notes, syllabi, course outlines, reading lists, examinations, student papers
5. Copies and drafts of reviews, speeches, articles and books
6. Research files
7. Departmental or committee records
8. Photographs
9. Tape recordings

This list is by no means definitive or exhaustive. It is intended to give a general idea of the kinds of materials which reflect and illuminate the careers of members of the faculty.