

Using Archival Assessments for Strategic Planning and Advocacy, Part I

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Summary

This report explains how to use an archival assessment to develop a strategic plan and advocate for support for folklore archives housed within larger institutions. We focus especially on how to manage collections in order to increase public awareness and use of archival materials while also considering how to prioritize projects based on such factors as the rate at which various materials are degrading, available labor and funding, incoming donations, development related to mission and organization trends, and researcher interests. We also suggest how to balance short-term concerns with long-term goals. This report is specific to our own context at a large university but will include a description of general approaches and practices that will be useful to other folklore archival collections that are attached to a variety of institutions.¹

Organizational Context

The Center for Folklore Studies (CFS) Folklore Archives was created in the 1960s when English professor, medievalist, and folklorist, Francis Lee Utley left his massive collection of 78, 33½, and 45 RPM global folk music, folk materials, and research notes to the English Department, which housed the folklore program. Over the years, the collection expanded considerably. Along with a collection of folklore journals and books (many donated by friends of CFS), the Archives holds over 10,000 student folklore collection projects; a sizeable genre collection (with a special focus on slang); research materials from fieldwork projects sponsored by the Ohio Arts Council, Ohio Humanities Council, and the Joint Program in the Traditions Arts; research on Lake Erie commercial fishermen; the “Say Amen” series conducted by the Southern Ohio Folklife Radio Program; the University District Oral History Project; and assorted collections donated by professional researchers. The Folklore Archives is housed at the Center for Folklore Studies, which is located in the Ohio Stadium (or, “The Shoe”), a concrete building where multiple large events—including Buckeye football, summer graduation, and various concerts—are held.

The Folklore Archives is central to the future integration and extension of the research, teaching, outreach, and development missions of the CFS. For our students, working in the Archives provides excellent hands-on training in core professional skills, learning how to organize, access, and interpret ethnographic materials. Indeed, work experience in the Archives has been the critical difference for some students vying for professional positions after graduation. Making collections such as “The University District Oral History Project,” “Key Ingredients,” and “New Harmonies” publicly accessible via our FolkOhio website (<http://folkohio.osu.edu/>) allows us to give back to the communities that support the university and to further the public humanities mission of the CFS. The Archives also contributes significantly toward development, as potential donors consider repositories for their private collections and make donations to help support the work of CFS and the Archives.

Because for many years there was no professional archivist maintaining the collection, a quarter-time graduate student archivist position was created in 2001 (and upgraded to half-time in 2010) to begin organizing the collection and accession decades of backlogged materials. In response to changing technology, work is being done to update formats and finding aids and to digitize as many materials as possible for better preservation and access. Operating without a budget to purchase archival materials and within a space that experiences multiple temperature fluctuations throughout the year, graduate archivists,

¹ At the time of writing this report, our archive had recently undergone an archival assessment and we were in the process of digesting the information, developing our strategic plan, and discussing how best to approach our administration about our needs and goals. So, this report looks forward to how we are thinking through our archival assessment and how we envision ourselves translating the findings into strategic planning and an action plan for advocacy. We are unable at this time to speak to the implementation and efficacy of these suggestions. A follow-up report will be produced in autumn 2015 to describe which strategies we chose to use and how we managed these aspects of our archival development.

and now the Director of the Folklore Archives, work under less-than-ideal conditions and function with inadequate resources (often cast-offs from other units).

The OSU Folklore Archives is one of the few repositories in the state for collections of ethnographic materials on traditional culture (and the only public one), and because of our outreach and engagement efforts, the Archives has gained a reputation as a valuable research resource, attracting researchers from across the country and Canada. Completing the transformation of the existing resources into a state-of-the-art research facility and maintaining its ongoing operations (thereby training students in core professional skills) is a top priority.

Formats

A number of collections at the Folklore Archives contain multiple media formats, often interspersed throughout their boxes and folders, including:

- Photographic prints, negatives, and slides
- Reel to reel tapes, audio cassettes
- Beta, reel, VHS, MiniDV, and DVD videos
- Minidisc, floppy disk, hard disk
- Monographs, journals, single-print booklets (often produced by non-profit arts organizations)
- 33½, 45, and 78 RPM records (including glass and instantaneous formats)
- Various paper formats: notes, ephemera, photocopies of archival material from other collections, bibliographic cards, correspondence, lecture materials, theses and dissertations, reference materials
- Born-digital and digitized files: .doc, .docx, pdf, .wav, .mp3, .mp4, .mov, .tiff, .jpg

The range of media formats found in the Folklore Archives, coupled with the Director's limited time and professional training, poses a significant challenge to adequately preserving collections.

Our current project (our first sustained digitizing effort, which has been funded by an anonymous donor²), involves digitizing and exhibiting rich documentation of local Ohio communities and festivals from the late 1970s and early 1980s, fieldwork which was originally supported by the Ohio Arts Council. The collection includes audio and video recordings in various formats (reel-to-reel, cassette, VHS, CD, and DVD formats). This project became a testing ground for fully accessioning a collection, creating a digital exhibit on our website, and creating a physical public exhibit in our library.

Administrative Context

Perhaps not unlike other archives, the Folklore Archives is administratively connected to (or, rather, nested under) a parent university organization (the Center for Folklore Studies) that is itself nested under a larger department (English) and a college (College of Arts and Sciences). One staff member (along with a faculty Director) coordinates all aspects of CFS operations.³ This means that in addition to directing the archives, the Assistant Director processes all HR and fiscal requests; oversees graduate administrative assistants, federal work-study workers, and volunteers; organizes academic and social events during the academic year, constructs the annual program booklet, promotional fliers and brochures; and conducts outreach both on campus and beyond. Given the multiple responsibilities of the Assistant Director that pull in different directions and require numerous skill and knowledge sets, she has limited time to devote strictly to archival development. We suspect that other institutions have similar staffing issues and contend with scarcities of their own. Our goal here is to offer our experiences dealing with our version of scarcity in the

² The \$25,000 donated for this project covered one semester's worth of Graduate Administrative Assistant work, digitizing costs, and a small supplies budget.

³ We sense that other folklore archives are similarly nested in various ways within institutions and do not have staff exclusively designated to the archive. At the very least, institutions must manage their responsibilities to "preserve the stuff," make it accessible, and conduct outreach in ways that maintain their visibility as a public resource. This becomes more difficult as budgets shrink and staff are asked to absorb additional duties. Finding time to devote sustained attention to a single project is becoming more and more difficult.

hopes that it will be useful to others. At the very least, we hope to become part of the larger conversation about how to deal with sometimes competing, but also very necessary, institutional needs.

Challenges & Reason for Assessment

Over the past three years, the Director of the Folklore Archives has been working to get a comprehensive view of archival holdings, but, due to the demands of the administrative context outlined above, doing so has been a challenge. Thus, building a strategic vision for the archives had often been set aside to attend to more immediately pressing administrative functions. All of the collections in the Folklore Archives are at various stages of accessioning, and almost all the collections need further processing in order to be made publicly available either for research or for public display on our website. Identification and preservation of high-risk materials was our first priority for the assessment, followed by strategic planning and establishing public outreach goals.⁴

At the same time, the administration of the College of Arts & Sciences has planned to relocate our Center, but we have yet to hear about when or where we might move. During our discussions about the move, our administrators have demonstrated a lack of understanding about the value of our holdings, often referring to our collections as “storage” rather than “unique” or “important” items. We realized we needed to find ways to explain the significance of our materials in broader contexts (i.e. how our archive contributes to the university, the state of Ohio, and to the field of folklore).

We felt that the best way to articulate our value would be to have a folklorist-archivist outside of OSU formally assess the collection, our space, and our current management challenges. Just as important, we wanted a fresh perspective on our holdings as well as input on how we might leverage our holdings to make our value more visible to the university. Other folklore archives that are nested within a larger institutions—particularly those institutions that are facing heavy budget cuts—can probably relate to the difficulties of advocating for space, fiscal support, and recognition from their administration during times of scarcity, and it is our hope that this report will shed light on that process.

Assessment

During the week of April 13 – 17th, 2015, Steve Green, Archivist of the Western Folklife Center, reviewed our archive and later produced a tremendous 90-page report that included recommendations for strategic planning, restructuring, and advocating for our archives. During his time with us, Steve toured the archives, examined representative samples of our diverse materials, asked questions about our procedures, forms, and standards, and photographed our holdings so that he could reference them after his visit. In preparation for this visit, he asked that we not “clean up” or change our routine in any way, so that he could provide recommendations based on our actual conditions and practices. Steve’s photographs were particularly useful to us when he sent his final report, as they provided examples of particular kinds of items whose preservation and future use require special handling and consideration. Overall, the report provided us with a clear and detailed picture of how a folklore archival specialist encountered our space and collections.

Some highlights from our assessment include recommendations to:

- organize collections using a hierarchical approach: focus on defining collection units and assigning collection numbers to those units, then create short abstracts of each collection giving the scope, dates and formats of each collection.
- store all audiovisual media together arranged by format in a designated location.
- rehouse almost all of our collections in archival-quality folders and cartons, as current storage conditions (ex: overstuffed sagging cardboard boxes) are accelerating the rate of deterioration and damage to our materials.
- seek a climate-controlled facility.
- improve collection-level access.

⁴ We note, however, that it can be difficult to maintain focus on preservation and strategic planning since outreach and engagement projects are more appealing to the university and donors. Our second report will comment on how we managed these various interests.

- build stronger cross-campus collaborations, especially with University Libraries and Special Collections and University Archives, especially asking for assistance to help preserve at-risk items.
- cross-reference our materials with other libraries, archives, and institutions to determine if items have already been preserved. If not, it might be possible to work together with other repositories to get items digitized, especially if doing so is in the interest of the collaborating institution.
- set aside protected time for the Director to work on archival projects and to seek professional development and additional training in relevant areas of focus.

Takeaways & Strategies for Advocating for Archival Collections in University and Larger Institutional Settings:

The assessment process itself is valuable for the institution, organization, and archives

Having someone new in your space helps you see things differently, question how you've done things, and modify your vision for the archives. Simply viewing your collections from a different perspective—from the perspective of someone who is completely new to it but trying to make the most sense out of it from a functional perspective—is extremely useful. Everyday, mundane, or taken-for-granted operations need to be explained in clear terms, and doing so helps you to make clearer the reasons why you do things in certain ways and, in some cases, alerts you to areas where you should change your current practices and procedures.

This is also a helpful process for understanding how your administrators view your collections. Though your consultant will likely be within the field of folklore and have an inherent appreciation for your materials (which is not necessarily the case with your administrators), the consultant, like an administrator, will need to have higher-level overview information about your collection and your archival processes (the types of things that can become less clear when you're mired in day-to-day operations). Going through the exercise of providing this more schematic picture to the consultant can help you communicate more effectively to administrators as you advocate for space and resources. For example, Steve identified the absence in the Assistant Director's daily schedule of a designated time for reviewing and making progress in managing the archives. By restricting the hours of operation and opening two hours later in the morning, the Associate Director was freed of supervisory duties and duties related to the reception of the public and could make systematic progress in reviewing student work and other archive-specific tasks.

The assessment process builds professional relationships that have long-term benefits

Talking through your processes with a trusted consultant (someone who isn't judging you and is instead interested in hearing about your work and thinking through challenges with you) is a pleasure. It helps to build long-term relationships in the field and, frankly, to develop an ally "out there" in the world. Once the consultant knows about your archive s/he will be able to send relevant information your way and help to suggest relevant contacts or opportunities in the future. During the weeks after Steve left Columbus, he forwarded numerous listerv emails about similar archives and projects across the United States, gave advice about reputable digitizing facilities nearby, and communicated thoughts he had about our collection that were valuable but peripheral to the foci in the final report. In short, the assessment initiated an ongoing dialogue that will continue to enhance the Folklore Archives for years to come.

Meet as a group to digest and brainstorm about the assessment, and then translate the assessment into a prioritized list

Our assessment was comprehensive, so there was a lot of information to digest. We began by each reading through the report and underlining or highlighting important and insightful recommendations. With the second reading, we began building a strategic planning document that we composed alongside the report, translating the suggestions into categories of significance within our institution. For instance, Steve's report was organized primarily by format type and then covered specific archival principals. We translated those categories into specific priority points and categories of action, such as "assess current archival collections and develop a strategic plan for the Folklore Archives," and "develop and institute a preservation plan"

(under which we included Steve's bulleted list of recommendations). Under these priority headings, we listed specific actions that we want to accomplish, to which we can later add proposed timelines. In July, we'll meet to discuss the report, develop the priority list, and devise a preservation plan that balances the needs and mission of the archive.⁵

Attending to organizational challenges in the archive teaches best practices for fieldwork and pre-archival-donation organization

While we knew that we would learn a lot about how to better organize and care for our archival materials, we also found ourselves inevitably reflecting on fieldwork documentation practices that made archival accessioning and identification easier. Some collections, such as those carried out by field researchers for the Ohio Arts Council Collection and the Lake Erie Collection, were clearly and consistently labeled, making it much easier for us to figure out how to process the collection some 40 years later. More recent but less intentionally organized collections, such as the cassette tapes accompanying the Student Ethnographic Papers, pose a serious problem for us, as a number of audio tapes were separated from their paper projects and contain little to no identifying information. This alerted us to the need to provide more information and guidance to students and faculty about how to collect and deposit materials with an eye toward donation. Providing clear, detailed directions about how to label files, for instance, would go a long way toward improving our accessioning rates.

Addressing the "digitize everything" problem

When speaking to our administrators about our space needs in the event that we were to move to a new location, they suggested that we digitize our larger paper collections (including original fieldwork papers that Intro to Folklore students have collected since the 1960s and a hefty collection of archival research materials compiled by our founder, Francis Lee Utley) in order to reduce our space footprint. From what we have heard from other archival institutions, this seems to be a common challenge in the field and something that needs to be addressed over and over again. In our case, the administrator said that they would hire a team of people to scan an entire collection over the course of a few days with the assumption that we would throw away the originals afterward, which we, of course, do not want to do.

While the offer is a generous one, it reveals a failure to understand the nature of our collections (the fact that we have multiple media formats in multiple collections, and even the primarily paper-based collections, such as the Student Ethnographic Papers, have photographs attached to them) as well as the type of planning and oversight that goes into such a project (we have well over 16,000 projects in the collection). In other words, we know that their notion that such a project could be accomplished to our standards in a few days is unrealistic. The "digitize everything" urge is another space where the archivist has to be able to quickly and efficiently explain why a single day of mass digitization is ultimately not in the best interest of the archives or the university. Though it may seem helpful to digitize a whole collection in a few hours, there would be little room for quality control throughout the process, which could lead to either damaging the projects or generating errors in the digital files. Further, the amount of up-front preparation (separating out and properly labeling all of the photographs and artifacts currently contained within over 16,000 collection folders, devising a digitizing strategy, and training personnel) would require a great deal of focused energy on this specific collection when we have other collections that are at higher risk of being lost if not digitized soon.

Our consultant nicely noted in his final report that keeping originals of mostly everything we digitize is standard archival practice and that even those items that we cannot digitize right now might, with the proper funding and technology, be able to be digitized in the future.

Assessment is about reframing value

⁵ Our follow-up report (part II) will provide insight into this process.

With our assessment in hand, we plan to approach our administration with the goal of articulating the value of our holdings in a way that will provide them with solid information that we hope will convince them to increase their support for our mission. Basically, we have to change the conversation from “storage” to “one-of-a-kind, invaluable materials that deserve sustained investment.” This can be an uphill battle for folklorists since what we do is not always understood (especially at the university), and, even when we are understood, we aren’t necessarily seen as contributing in a vital way (an issue that the humanities faces in general).

We will have limited time and attention from our administrators to pitch our request, which will then be measured against significant budget cuts our college is currently undergoing to offset a substantial deficit. We plan to attach a 1-page cover letter explaining the archival assessment report, noting a couple of significant issues and suggestions. If we’re lucky, we will get a 30-60-minute meeting with our Dean to discuss the seriousness of our archival needs, so we’ll take a “highlights” approach to this interaction, which is to say that we will note the most significant findings and recommendations, link them to the larger-scale mission of the archives (which is itself reflective of the university’s mission), and provide proposals for both large-scale and small-scale support options. However, having the complete 38-page assessment and accompanying 49 pages of photographs provides weight, grounding, and import to this necessarily more superficial conversation that can help to break down the existing stereotypes against which we are struggling.⁶

Make your assessment visible and easily accessible to your administration

Since a main goal of our assessment was to legitimize our need for adequate archival space and financial support, it is important that we communicate our findings to our leadership in a clear, concise way. Handing over a long assessment document will not be effective because they simply won’t have time to read it. Thankfully, Steve provided us with a summarized list of recommendations at the end of his report, which we can include in our cover letter to the Dean and supplement with an explanation of how following through on these suggestions will impact the Folklore Archives, Center for Folklore Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, the University, and community members and folklore institutions in the state of Ohio and beyond.

“Now that we know”: Leveraging an archival assessment for better care, insurance, and investment

Our assessment pointed to multiple areas in which our archival preservation standards could and should be improved. In sum, we are not functioning at the most basic of archival preservation standards due to a lack of funding and infrastructure. Most of our suggestions had to do with investing in archival-quality storage, such as purchasing cases for our numerous cassette tapes, removing our extensive student projects from file cabinets to archival boxes, and digitizing fragile media, including our instantaneous disks. Thus far, we have had no official budget for our archives, and most of our purchases for the facilities have occurred at the end of the year when we have to spend down the last bit of our funds from the College, so we have yet to systematically determine our material needs and develop a prioritized purchasing plan. Steve’s assessment, along with his handy priority list, will help us be more intentional about purchasing going forward.

That said, if you don’t have a budget, you can’t purchase anything. We are hoping that a “now that we know” approach to our collections will help us advocate for a regular, if small, supply budget for our collections, allowing us to do a little bit each year and inch toward properly preserving all our materials. What we mean by “now that we know” is that up until this point we haven’t really had the expertise or perspective (and, in our defense, the opportunity) to succinctly explain why our collections deserve financial support. Now that we know more about how our current storage practices are damaging, or, at least, not actively promoting preservation, we can show (significantly, through third-party assessment) that

⁶ Our follow-up report (part II) will illustrate how we put this cover letter together and how we negotiated the meeting.

we can and need to do better. To deny us funds to improve our facilities is to knowingly neglect one-of-a-kind folk materials valuable to future researchers, institutions, and communities.

Further, learning more about our collections from Steve, who is much more conversant with the larger world of archives and folk traditions, helps us to contextualize the contribution our preservation efforts would make toward other collections across the nation. For instance, Steve noticed that one of our instantaneous disks might be a recording of the 1940 National Folklife Festival, of which the Library of Congress does not currently have a copy. Now that we know that this recording could benefit the LOC and that they would be interested in obtaining a copy, there's more incentive for the university to invest in digitizing that record because we would be contributing to a larger national media project.

Build development and outreach goals out of current collections

During our assessment, we realized that our Ohio Arts Council Collection, a series of fieldwork projects carried out in the late 1970s and early 1980s to document Ohio folklife, could be productively revived as an archival outreach project. Incorporating an Ohio field school into our outreach program, we found, not only built upon a previously existing project and faculty expertise, but also helped us to consider how we can grow our collections and position our archives as a central repository and digital gallery for folklore collections in Ohio.⁷ Broadening the initial Ohio Arts Council projects and collection into our strategic framework for the future shows a sense of mission continuity over several decades and positions us as a repository with a responsibility to assist other institutions within the state. While we currently do not have a strategic plan (the consultancy will serve as a basis for developing it in the coming months), noticing and capitalizing on such linkages is influential in shaping our larger goals and ways of carrying them out.

Increase Public Awareness

Processing and preserving collections goes hand in hand with increasing public awareness and conducting outreach. We realized that telling students, faculty, and organizations across campus about our collections wouldn't amount to much if the materials weren't properly organized and accessible. What we really needed was a kind of "nesting" period during which we could review Steve's insights and recommendations, have a conversation about developing our strategic plan, revising our mission, and implementing suggestions that do not require financial support, such as assigning collection numbers and continuing our work to create a master finding aid as well as individual collection finding aids. Our nesting period needed to be balanced with our outreach mission, however, which is why we proposed an Ohio field school that would allow us work with students to connect to other institutions and individual collectors and practitioners across the state in order to support folklife and preservation throughout Ohio.

We feel that increasing public awareness relies upon being (or becoming) familiar with one's own holdings and understanding (or learning) how they fit historically, culturally, and institutionally with the collections of other organizations and communities across the university, state, and beyond. We will spend the coming year developing ways to talk about and relate our holdings to individuals and groups both near and far. Alongside that internal work, we'll be seeking information from others about their holdings.

Taking Action

The assessment report has provided us with specific data from which we can now work to advocate with administration and develop our internal strategic plan and direction, a process that will allow us to balance our long term and short-term goals and activities. Based on Steve Green's thoughtful recommendations, we have taken the following steps to implement his suggestions:

⁷ This was actually the original idea behind our FolkOhio website (folkohio.osu.edu). We had developed it so far as to display our own collections but had not yet reached the point of soliciting gallery exhibits from other collections around the state. The FolkOhio platform will be retired this summer so we have been working to shift the galleries over to our main website (cfs.osu.edu).

- During summer 2015, the CFS and Archives Directors will hold a brainstorming meeting to discuss the assessment, develop a strategic plan and core mission, and compose a letter to the Dean that explains what it will take to make the Folklore Archive a state-of-the-art repository for folklore materials in the state of Ohio. Our goal is to produce a synthesized cover letter explaining the significance of our holdings and the issues that will arise if they are not properly housed.
 - Very likely we will be asked to estimate the cost to rehouse our collections, so we will need to be ready to give a decent estimate of that dollar figure. We will propose two estimates: one for high-risk materials and another for high-risk and moderate-risk materials.
 - We want to especially highlight and contextualize some of the “gems” that Steve identified in our collections that will need to be cross-referenced with other archival institutions.
 - Our letter will explain the many considerations at play when assessing potential spaces for housing our archive and advocate that the Folklore Archives should be likened to the University Libraries’ Special Collections rather than to “storage.”
- We have started speaking with Special Collections about potential collaborative and supportive opportunities that would be beneficial for both units. Special Collections uses ArchivesSpace to catalog their holdings, and we will consider adopting it to make our database compatible with theirs.
- We have recently moved to a schedule where the archives will be closed in the mornings and for one day a week for the Assistant Director to spend solely on archival work.
- Beginning this summer, we will host a short workshop for graduate students and faculty teaching introductory folklore courses that will deposit materials to the Folklore Archive in order to communicate the importance and significance of their donation and review guidelines for digital submission. The Assistant Director will also encourage faculty to set aside time for her to give presentations to students about how to submit their work at the end of the term.
- Practical workshops for graduate students will be brought back into CFS programming starting in autumn 2015 to train students on best practices for collecting and organizing ethnographic research with eventual donation to archives in mind.
- In spring 2015, we put forth a proposal to our donor to support two Ohio field schools over two years, which will include a survey component where the directors will visit each of the four quadrants of the state to learn about folklore collections housed elsewhere.

Overall, the archival assessment has allowed us to recognize the importance of what we have, to prioritize our preservation needs, to critically review our policies and procedures, and to articulate our space needs both for others and ourselves. It has also led us to identify a more dynamic role for the archives and archival stewardship in our general operations, to engage in professional development at every level (from undergraduate students to Director), and to advocate more vigorously with our administration and with donors to advance the teaching, outreach and research mission of our center.