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Strategic Directions: Appraisal Policy

National Archives and Records Administration
Strategic Directions: Appraisal Policy

October 2003

NOTE: This document is excerpted from the internal NARA Directive 1441 dated October 14, 2003. This document omits only internal NARA designations of responsibilities.

1. Purpose

This policy sets out the strategic framework, objectives, and guidelines that the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) uses to determine whether Federal records have archival value. It also provides more specific guidelines for appraising certain categories of records.

Records appraisal is not a rote exercise. It requires informed judgments, knowledge of and sensitivity to researchers' interests, recognition of resource considerations, and a willingness to acknowledge and understand comments and suggestions from diverse perspectives. This document facilitates the appraisal process by providing a consistent framework for appraisal decision making.

2. Authority

The authority and responsibility of the Archivist of the United States to determine the retention and disposition of Federal records stems from Chapters [21](#), [29](#), and [33](#) ([3302](#), [3303a](#)) of the Federal Records Act, 44 United States Code.

Chapters [21](#) and [29](#) of the Federal Records Act, 44 United States Code also provide for the transfer of records with archival value to NARA's legal custody when they are no longer needed for the conduct of agency business. [NARA 1501](#), Custody of Federal Records of Archival Value sets out NARA's custody policy.

3. Scope

All Federal governmental entities create and maintain records in the conduct of official business. However, this policy applies only to records subject to the [Federal Records Act](#) (FRA)—records of all executive branch agencies, the United States District and Circuit Courts, and Legislative branch agencies. Records created by the President and Presidential entities, the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Supreme Court are not subject to the FRA. The appraisal of records created by these entities is not covered by this policy.

Certain agencies such as the Federal Deposit Insurance

Corporation are not wholly governmental and are not subject to the FRA. However, these agencies typically follow FRA regulations and are covered by this policy.

4. Definitions

As employed in this policy, the terms below are defined as follows:

- a. **Appraisal** – the process of determining the value and thus the final disposition of Federal records, making them either temporary or permanent.
- b. **Archival value** – the enduring historical or other value, as determined by the Archivist of the United States, that warrants NARA's continued preservation of records beyond the period required to transact the business of their originating agency or its successor in function. Records determined to have archival value are designated on records disposition schedules as "permanent records."
- c. **Originating agency** – the Federal agency in which records are created, received, and accumulated in the conduct of business.
- d. **Permanent records** – records appraised by NARA as having archival value.
- e. **Sampling** – the selection of file units or items from a body of records made in such a way that, taken together, the items selected are representative of the whole.
- f. **Temporary records** – records approved by NARA for destruction, either immediately or after a specified event or period of time.

5. Appraisal responsibilities and roles

NARA does not appraise records in isolation. As stated in its [Strategic Plan](#), NARA works with other interested parties to ensure that "essential evidence is created, identified, appropriately scheduled, and managed for as long as needed." The Archivist of the United States has the statutory responsibility to decide how long records must be retained and which records have archival value and thus are to be retained permanently. In making appraisal decisions, the Archivist considers the recommendations of NARA staff, and seeks and considers the views expressed by originating agencies and the public.

6. Strategic framework

NARA's mission is to ensure "for the Citizen and the Public Servant, for the President and the Congress and the Courts ready access to essential evidence."

Essential evidence is comprised of those records that document the:

- (1) Rights of American citizens;
- (2) Actions of Federal officials; and
- (3) National experience.

Records that document the rights of citizens enable them to establish their identities, protect their rights, and claim their entitlements. Records that document actions of Federal officials that enable them to explain past decisions, form future policy, and

be accountable for consequences. Records that document the national experience provide the means for evaluating the effects of Federal actions on the nation and for understanding its history, science, and culture, including the man-made and natural environment.

Not all records that constitute essential evidence possess archival value. Rather, NARA authorizes agencies to destroy most of these records when they are no longer needed to meet agency business needs.

Records that are appropriate for permanent retention are discussed below, using as a framework the definition of essential evidence spelled out in NARA's [Strategic Plan](#).

7. Permanent records categories

NARA uses the categories specified in the [Strategic Plan](#) as the beginning point for appraisal. These categories provide an overall high-level framework for the analysis of records to determine whether or not they are permanent. Note that the three categories are not mutually exclusive: some records that warrant permanent retention may fit into multiple categories, while others may relate to a single category.

- a. **Records documenting the rights of citizens.** Many Federal records provide evidence of the legal status, rights, and obligations of individuals, groups, organizations, and governmental bodies. In most cases, the legal rights implications of records eventually expire. In a few instances, however, the importance of records for protecting legal rights endures despite the passage of time. Records falling into this category are preserved permanently.
- b. **Records documenting the actions of Federal officials.** Most Federal records document the actions of the Government. NARA seeks to retain that portion containing significant documentation of Government activities and essential to understanding and evaluating Federal actions. For example, NARA retains permanently those records that document the basic organizational structure of Federal agencies and organizational changes over time, policies and procedures that pertain to an agency's core mission, and key agency decisions and actions.
- c. **Records documenting the national experience.** Some records document the impact of Federal actions on individuals, communities, or the natural and man-made environment. The Government also creates and acquires much information about people, places, material objects, and scientific phenomena, as well as about social conditions, political and economic activities, and events in the United States and other countries. Much of this information does not have archival value. However, some is essential to understanding the role of the Federal Government and the history of our nation, its people, and the environment.

8. Appraisal objectives

Within the high-level strategic framework of rights, actions of Federal officials, and the national experience outlined above, NARA will identify for permanent retention records that:

- a. Retain their importance for documenting legal status, rights and obligations of individuals, groups, organizations, and governmental bodies despite the passage of time;
- b. Provide evidence of significant policy formulation and business processes of the Federal Government;
- c. Provide evidence of our Government's conduct of foreign relations and national defense;
- d. Provide evidence of Federal deliberations, decisions, and actions relating to major social, economic, and environmental issues;
- e. Provide evidence of the significant effects of Federal programs and actions on individuals, communities, and the natural and man-made environment;
- f. Contribute substantially to knowledge and understanding of the people and communities of our nation.

9. General and specific guidelines

In determining which records support its appraisal objectives and thus warrant permanent retention, NARA uses the general guidelines outlined in [Appendix 1](#). NARA has also developed specific guidelines for selected kinds of records (see [Appendix 2](#)). In the future, NARA may develop specific guidelines for other kinds of records.

10. Reappraisal

NARA will reappraise records when there is compelling evidence that earlier appraisal decisions require review. In such circumstances, NARA will seek Federal agency and public involvement in the reappraisal process.

11. Policy review

NARA will review this policy as necessary in consultation with Federal agencies, research communities, and other interested parties.

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Appendix 1 – General Appraisal Guidelines

In appraising records to decide whether records have archival value and should be retained permanently, NARA will use the guidelines found below. Applying the guidelines to specific cases will not be a mechanical process akin to adding up points or checking boxes. However, using these guidelines will make decision making easier and will result in more consistent appraisal judgments that can be readily explained both within NARA and to outside constituents. In developing appraisal recommendations for the Archivist of the United States, NARA staff must address the following questions. The questions should be considered together, rather than in isolation.

How significant are the records for research?

The future research potential of records is the most difficult variable to determine. What is of relatively low research use today may become of great research use in the future. Perhaps even more important and difficult to predict are the issues and topics that will be considered of significance in the future. Nevertheless, it is

important to consider this question in making appraisal decisions. It is necessary to consider the kinds and extent of current research use and to try to make inferences about anticipated use both by the public and by the Government.

How significant is the source and context of the records?

The significance of the functions and activities performed by the originating agency or agencies and the business context within which the records are created are important considerations for the appraiser. The appraiser must relate the source and context of the records to the strategic framework and objectives found in this directive.

Is the information unique?

Appraisals must be conducted in context with other records. The appraiser must determine whether the records under consideration are the only or are the most complete source for significant information. Records that contain information not available in other records (including other Federal records as well as files accumulated by state and local governments) are more likely to warrant permanent retention than records containing data that is duplicated in other sources. However, NARA may decide to retain records that contain information available elsewhere in the case of records that are more complete or more easily accessible than the alternative source.

How usable are the records?

Consider these three issues:

1. **How does the way records were gathered, organized, presented, or used in the course of business affect their usability?** For example, records whose arrangement, indexing, or other identifying information makes it easy to locate needed information are more likely to warrant retention than records containing similar documentation that are extremely difficult to use.
2. **How do technical considerations affect the usability of the records?** For example, some electronic records may pose such technological challenges that extraordinary measures may be required to recover the information, while other records containing similar documentation (either electronic records or records in another format) may be usable with much less effort.
3. **How does the physical condition of the records affect their usability?** For example, some records may have deteriorated to the point that the information they contain is not readable.

Do these records serve as a finding aid to other permanent records?

Records that can be used as a finding aid to other records may warrant retention even if the information they contain is not unique or complete. For example, the records may enable a researcher to identify which state or local government holds birth certificates, marriage licenses, and other documents relevant to his or her research.

What is the timeframe covered by the information?

"Timeframe" may refer to the date span of the entire body of records or the length of time that individual records or file units typically cover.

The longer the date span for which there are extant files, the more valuable the records are likely to be for research. For example, they might be valuable to support longitudinal studies by the Government or other researchers.

Some bodies of records are made up of individual documents or files whose content covers many years. This attribute includes records where the documents in individual files are accumulated over a relatively short period but contain information pertaining to events covering a long period of time (e.g., official military personnel folders or military unit histories).

Do the records document decisions that set precedents?

Do decisions or actions of the originating agency set precedents, or is each decision or action independent of others and merely based on policy set at some higher level? If the former, the records are more likely to warrant permanent retention. Examples include appellate court decisions and policy files at the highest level within an agency.

Are the records related to other permanent records?

Other things being equal, records that add significantly to the meaning or value of other records already appraised as permanent are more likely to warrant retention than records lacking such a relationship. Records that are chronological continuations of records already in the National Archives are likely to warrant permanent retention, particularly if the older segments of the records are subject to high reference use.

Do the files contain non-archival records?

Files that contain only a small interspersed of records lacking archival value (i.e., non-archival records), such as routine fiscal documents, records relating to the issuance of expendable supplies, etc. are more likely to be appraised as permanent than records where the interspersed of non-archival documents is high, particularly if the overall volume of the records is large.

When the volume of records containing some highly valuable material is relatively small, it may still be appropriate to appraise the records for permanent retention even if a significant fraction of the records lack archival value. Disposition instructions should allow (but not require) NARA to dispose of non-archival records after the originating agency transfers the records to NARA's legal custody.

What are the cost considerations for long-term maintenance of the records?

This consideration should play a significant role only in marginal cases. In such cases, an appraisal should balance the anticipated research potential of the records with the resource implications of retaining them permanently. Other things being equal, records with low long-term cost implications are more likely to warrant permanent retention than those records that carry high long-term costs.

What is the volume of records?

Propose for permanent retention (regardless of volume) records that are clearly permanent in accordance with other appraisal guidelines. Volume will play a role only in the appraisal of records whose archival value is marginal. Other things being equal, records that are compact are more likely to be appraised as permanent than those that are voluminous.

Is sampling an appropriate appraisal tool?

Appraisal decisions that call for sampling records may be made only after careful analysis of all other options and the costs and benefits of implementing a sampling decision. A sampling disposition will not be used where this option merely defers problems. Wherever possible, a sampling disposition should be avoided where the disposition requires item by item decisions to retain individual records or individual file units.

Appraisal decisions involving sampling must specify a process that permits the easy identification of records that are to be retained permanently.

- Processes that involve subjective judgments or item by item decisions to retain individual records or individual file units require a justification detailing the circumstances that prevent an objective, easily implemented process and estimating the staff hours required to perform the sampling on a year's accumulation of records.
- Appraisal decisions involving sampling must specify whether the originating agency or NARA will be responsible for implementing the sampling work.
- Where the need for sampling is driven by the originating agency, this appraisal decision should only be made if the agency is strongly committed to doing the sampling work.
- Where the need for sampling is driven by NARA staff, this appraisal decision should only be made if NARA archival personnel are strongly committed to doing the sampling work and have the resources to do it.

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Appendix 2 – Special Considerations for Selected Types of Records

Some types of records require special consideration in the appraisal process. The appraisal factors identified in this appendix will be used together with the general guidelines in [Appendix 1](#) and the strategic framework and objectives found in the main body of this policy document. This appendix will be expanded if guidelines for additional types of records are developed.

PERSONAL DATA

Personal data records contain information about an individual and may also include information about his or her family members. Included are such records as the personnel folders of Federal employees and members of the armed services; the files that are accumulated in connection with determining an individual's eligibility for Federal Government benefits, such as a pension, medical care, or mortgage guaranty; and the records that document the immigration to the United States of the foreign born or their application for legal residence or citizenship.

In appraising personal data records, it is necessary to take into account the following:

- **Size and nature of the population**

Some personal data records cover nearly all of the American population. Records of this sort are more likely to warrant permanent retention than records containing information on only a small percentage of the population. However, even if the total number of people represented in a body of personal data records is relatively low, the records may still warrant permanent retention if they contain information concerning a large percentage of a subgroup of the American population (e.g., an ethnic or racial group or residents of a specific region).

- **Nature of the information**

Researchers who use personal data records have

traditionally had a high interest in the following types of information concerning individuals. Records that are rich in the kinds of information outlined below are more likely to warrant permanent retention than records that contain only a small number of these elements:

- previously used names
- date and place of birth, place(s) of residence;
- date, place, and cause of death;
- if foreign-born, date and place of arrival in the US, and if naturalized, date and place of naturalization;
- names of parents;
- dates and places of parents' births and deaths;
- name(s) of spouse(s), date(s) and place(s) of marriage;
- names of children;
- date and place of children's birth;
- education level;
- educational institutions attended and the dates;
- occupation;
- property ownership;
- names of employers and work location(s)
- military service, including branch of service, dates of service, and rank
- identification photographs of individuals

Researchers appear to be increasingly interested in medical information as well. NOTE: It will be necessary to monitor possible effects of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) on access to medical information.

OBSERVATIONAL DATA FROM THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES

By their nature, scientific observational data, created by space- and earth-based platforms, are unique, nonrepeatable, and are usually voluminous. Records of scientific observations are created by programs that involve the expenditure of billions of dollars, and reference services often require specific scientific or technical expertise. Electronic observations often require a substantial investment in both computer hardware and software to maintain or migrate to new platforms. Further, the data may have value to the agency, the Government, or to the public for unanticipated uses long after they have served their original purpose. Scientific observations are more likely to be appraised as having archival value if:

- They cannot be extrapolated from other data sets or observations at a reasonable cost.
- Appropriate metadata or other finding aids are available.
- The observations are complete and are not dependent on other records or observations that are appraised as temporary or are not extant and accessible.
- NARA or a NARA-approved affiliate can provide appropriate resources for storage, preservation, and reference service.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY RECORDS

Some records that ordinarily would be appraised as temporary may document the disposal of hazardous or toxic wastes, the exposure of people to harmful substances, and the release of hazardous or

harmful elements into the environment. Litigation or claims against the Government may be brought long after the actual incident or exposure, and records that may be temporary in other circumstances, e.g., bills of lading or building specifications, may be essential to protect the rights of the Government or citizens. Furthermore, this value may span several generations. These records may also be subject to public controversy or scrutiny. It is necessary to consider these issues if the records' archival value cannot be determined with certainty, or if it is unclear how long they will be needed by the Government. Environmental information is more likely to be appraised as having archival value if:

- The records do not duplicate permanent records found in other Federal agencies or at other levels of government.
- The records provide documentation that has long term significance for legal rights or government accountability.
- The records are likely to be significant for documenting medical-related issues.
- The records adequately document the evolution of the state of the environment from before an environmental incident to clean-up and beyond.

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