THE UNITED ILLUMINATING COLLECTION: AN ARCHIVAL
APPROACH TO NON-TRADITIONAL INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Dealing with non-traditional or "grey" material has long been a challenge for the information world. This paper discusses general archival procedures used to process the variety of formats in the United Illuminating Collection. Specific problems encountered during the project and decisions made in each situation are highlighted.

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The dilemma: how to control and give reasonable access to a gift of approximately 80 linear feet of assorted folders, coded data entry forms and manuscripts assembled during the United Illuminating Company’s production of an environmental impact statement, previous to the construction of two power plants, one in New Haven harbor and the other in Bridgeport Harbor, Connecticut. This mass of raw data collected by two different consulting companies between the years 1970 and 1985 will be valuable to researchers studying various species and population trends in Long Island Sound.

In the case of the United Illuminating collection, the dilemma was easily resolved. The Long Island Sound Resource Center had a library services contractor who could supply the staffing and expertise needed to process the collection. After a crash course in archival procedures, I joined Kris Jacobi and Marilyn Ottone of the Donohue group as they proceeded to get this data under physical and intellectual control.

The traditional archival approach was chosen, focusing on groups of documents, rather than single item cataloging. Using this approach, the data were arranged from the researcher’s point of view, all the while maintaining the order
originally imposed as well as the identity or provenance of the record groups. Materials were kept in their original sequence during the archival process and metal clips, staples and rubber bands were removed.

Accessioning of a collection begins by taking possession of the collection by means of a transferral letter or some other formal method of transfer. In the case of the United Illuminating collection this document was a letter from Kathleen M. Shanley, Manager for Environmental Licensing and Regulatory Affairs at United Illuminating.

In addition, a list of criteria was drawn up to ensure the usefulness of the material to the Long Island Sound Resource Center. Issues considered in dealing with the variety of formats in the collection were:
  * quality of the data
    * usefulness of the data
      -- audience
      -- frequency of use
    * ability to manipulate, integrate and interpret data
  * ability to process the data
    -- categories, units, formats
    -- time involved in processing
    -- impact on system
    -- impact on productivity
  * ability to store data
    -- impact on space
    -- retrievability
  * data format: if data is available on tape, is it likely that individual data sets (paper) will have any real use?

These criteria would serve as basic guidelines for us as we sorted through and processed the collection. A quick sampling gave us a good idea of the original filing order and types of record formats we would be working with. In most cases, the division developed logically into the following categories:
  * general geographic locations
  * temporal ranges
  * project name
  * accession number
  * description of data
  * categories of data in set
    -- chemical
    -- taxonomic
    -- geologic, etc.

Now we were ready to inventory the collection. Box after box, file folder after file folder was checked to make sure that all like data was together and that the content of the folders matched the headings previously typed on them. It soon
became apparent that the collection had been used after it's initial storage in the boxes. Stray folders were reunited in their proper sequence and when the folder contents differed from the labels, the correction was noted in pencil on the folder.

One of the major sources of concern revolved around redundant information duplicated in various formats. For example, we received original data sheets, coded data entry forms and printouts of the data sets. The question of whether to retain all forms of the data became a major issue. To help us reach a decision and to protect the Resource Center from any legal problems, the Donohue Group contacted Ms. Shanley, the person responsible for giving the collection to the Resource Center. This was several months ago. If a decision is not forthcoming, material considered redundant will have to be put in dead storage until the problem is resolved.

A decision also had to be made considering the numerous reports generated by the study. Should we keep preliminary drafts in their various stages of editing or just final reports? From a manuscript and archival standpoint, the preliminary drafts, which were usually cut, pasted and written over, are of historical value only in context of the final product, and we chose to keep only the final reports. When there was no discernible final report, the most clearly written version was kept.

As we inventoried, we arranged the records by subject, then by date within the subject and reassembled them into acid free folders. The folders were then placed in gray, hinged archival boxes to keep them dust-free and lessen their exposure to air and light. A detailed inventory of the contents was attached to each box. Later, consolidated lists would be entered in the Resource Center database in a form similar to a serial record. The boxes themselves were shelved in alphabetical order by subject. Cumbersome materials, that would not fit into the archival boxes (printouts, rolls of graphs, etc.) were placed on the shelves in subject/date order.

The materials were finally under physical control. Now they must be described effectively in order to make them accessible for use. This description is called a "finding aid" and, in the case of the United Illuminating collection, consists of the construction of a database record for each archival box, describing the box's contents and location. This database record will be accessible through key word search.

Of course, use is the true test of any collection. Only as researchers begin to use the United Illuminating collection will we know if all the hours of processing, sorting, and labeling were worth it. Hopefully, the information gathered by United Illuminating will provide a positive contribution to the knowledge and study of Long Island Sound.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


