Records Surveys and a Healthy Collection Lifecycle


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John Fleckner’s 1977 article, “Reaching Out: The Place of Records Surveys in Archival Practice,” tackles an archival practice that is arguably one of the most beneficial tools archivists have at their disposal: a records survey. In his article, Fleckner speaks to the lack of information and theory surrounding records and repository surveys. The piece is divided into two sections: an overview of the aims of records surveys and Fleckner’s thoughts on the mechanics of the surveys themselves. Fleckner shares his insights on the usefulness of conducting these surveys, some of which have continuities that continue to the present. However, in the very beginning of the piece, he aptly notes that little guidance about these practices exists: “We have no general discussions of the relationship of the records survey to general archival practice and theory and only a few descriptions of completed survey projects” (p. 14). Since the publication of Fleckner’s article, there have been a handful of records surveys conducted within the United States, some citywide, some countywide, and some statewide. Examples include “The Texas County Records Inventory Project,”¹ a statewide historical records survey in Washington,² and a case study done on a historical records survey in Oklahoma in 1991.³ While there have been literature and case studies on records surveys since

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Fleckner’s article, they are certainly not as robust as one might expect given the usefulness of records surveys for archival document management and practice. The tagline that can be given to records surveys based on Fleckner’s article would be “useful, but often involved,” which has remained the same today. Fleckner defines an archival/records survey as “a systematic procedure used by archivists, records managers, and others to gather information about records and papers not in their immediate custody” (p. 15). He delineates three separate types of records surveys: a records management survey, or records where the surveyor has immediate control; a repository survey, which includes materials in more than one institution or place; and a “non-repository” survey, which centers on materials with a more generalized or specific focus (p. 15). I would add a fourth type of survey to Fleckner’s list: a collection survey, which is an evaluation of an institution’s holdings for descriptive clarity, assessment of material backlog, and evaluation of materials for preservation and access. Wendy Pflug has an excellent piece about systematic approaches to collection surveys, which asserts that although collection surveys are overwhelmingly beneficial for repositories to conduct, the practice of doing them is irregular at best. I conducted a collection survey at the John Hay Library at Brown University in just under four years, and I suspect I could have continued the project forever. I say this to give teeth to something that all the literature I consulted asserted about any archival survey, whether records- or collection-focused, statewide or institutional—these surveys are often a complicated undertaking, and they involve many moving pieces.

For example, in John F. Burns’s piece about the Washington State Historical Records Survey, he goes into considerable detail about the types of staff who worked on the survey (a records management survey as described above), summarizing, “The success of a project is highly dependent on the skill of its personnel... In addition to archival skills, the field workers in a survey that includes records held out of custody must have intelligence, self reliance, durability, and dedication.” Pflug’s assessment of staff for collection surveys is similar, finding that respondents from the case study they conducted noted “an average of two full-time staff members and one part-time staff member working on their collection survey. Assistance from students and volunteers was also used at an average of eight hours per week.” Both of these statements hold true to my personal experience; when I conducted my own collection survey, a variety of staff and students assisted at any given time. Regardless of the type of archival survey, organization and understanding of directions is key. For example, being able to administer a response survey to various repositories to gain information about records is only the first step. The survey must...

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5 Wendy Pflug, “Assessing Archival Collections through Surveys,” *The Reading Room* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 64–82.


be written in a way that yields an effective and helpful response, and those working on the survey must be trained to extract information in a way that efficiently moves the survey work forward. Fleckner sums this up well in his 1977 piece, asserting, “Surveys using questionnaires rely on the willingness (and ability) of the respondents to reply; those using field workers depend on records custodians to permit access to materials” (p. 19). In my collection survey, we depended on both. We also had the added assistance of modern technology, which made gathering preliminary data from a wide audience quicker (in some cases, instantaneous) and easier. Email, for example, is a markedly faster way to receive information than traditional mail, which was used in many of the pieces that Fleckner references. In the very early stages of my survey, I sent out a Google Form to curators trying to gain documented information about any collection currently under their purview. The results depended not only on the curator themselves, but also the information they retained about a particular collection subject area. Similar to Fleckner’s point about field workers for records surveys, my collection survey’s progress varied based on the availability and interest of the student workers who were hired.

But how are records surveys helpful, and why should we continue to devote time, staff, and resources to them? Fleckner lists three main benefits of records surveys, which are not so dissimilar from Pflug’s findings and my own experience on the usefulness of our modern-day collection surveys. The benefits are as follows: 1) records surveys provide “valuable initial steps” on developing policies, such as acquisitions strategies and documentation (p. 17); 2) records surveys encourage the transfer of historical records to archives and may contribute data to provide the basis for comprehensive records management procedures; and 3) records surveys help further the archival profession’s mission of increasing access by expanding knowledge of materials from other repositories, local or otherwise (p. 18). For non-archivally trained parties involved with records surveys, creating and conducting “official” records surveys helps archivists and archives legitimize the importance of their archival practices. It makes what archivists do, as well as how and why we do it, clear to those outside our archival day-to-day work. Records surveys exist as a vital service for regional, county, and statewide historical records if we are to help preserve them for future use.

The comparison of past records surveys to the modern-day collection survey is strikingly similar. Although modern collection surveys exist to serve the singular repository versus the widespread record survey that Fleckner’s piece references, the priorities of both are much the same. In the collection assessment survey from Pflug’s piece, respondents shared that “unknown collections were identified, processing projects were planned, items were earmarked for preservation, and publishable collection metadata had been created as result of the survey.”8 In my own collection survey experience, I had the task of working with the eight floors of published materials that the library keeps on site, along with any straggler collections that my colleagues and I came across in the stacks. My main objectives

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8 Pflug, “Assessing,” 75.
were as follows: 1) to survey roughly 85 percent of our published holdings for metadata discrepancies (barcodes, cataloging issues, etc.); 2) to assess the existence and accuracy of MARC catalog records and locating devices (e.g., barcodes); and 3) to evaluate items for conservation and preservation treatment.

Whether a survey is internal to a single repository or more geographically widespread, it is important to document the stages of the survey and make this documentation available upon its conclusion. Collection and record documentation is the single most important tool we have as archivists, but we perhaps do not use it as frequently or generously as we should. Interestingly, Fleckner asserts the importance of documentation several times within his piece, describing the archivist as an active participant in documentary selection and creation (p. 16). The documentation that Fleckner refers to, however, is seemingly the documents themselves. One could argue that the way we view documentation today versus how the archival field viewed it in 1977 is very different, and that most modern archivists today define documentation as a roadmap—they are documents that are handed down within an institution or a position that provide context about policies and practices and guidance for the future. Pflug was able to gather data about lack of archival documentation through their assessment, reporting that a “common challenge for the respondents [of the survey about collection surveys] was the very little or non-existent provenance information on the collections.” A participant in Pflug’s study even stated, “Complexity of and incorrect information recorded for many collections, and messy accession information have slowed this all down.” I think, therefore, it is difficult for the modern-day archivist to consider participation in a regional or statewide records survey (as described by Fleckner), when our own in-house documentation often needs cleanup and organization. Archival documentation can and should exist in all aspects of collecting and stewardship, whether the materials in question are small or large, uncomplicated or complex. Our documentation selections should align with our collecting policies, and our documentation should guide us in the future on what and what not to collect.

Routine records and collection surveys can help archivists maintain healthy and ethical collection ecosystems. Years removed from Fleckner’s article, his observations still help us reevaluate our collecting practices, confirm current holdings, check for appropriate cataloging and metadata, and plan for future collection and space management of materials. Records surveys can exist as collective efforts to gain extensive information about records from a regional area or group of repositories, or they can exist in the form of a collection survey to work on surveying materials in-house. Fleckner builds on these fundamentals in his piece, as do a few other published pieces from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and this continues to the present day with Pflug’s piece on collection surveys. The aims

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11 See aforementioned footnotes of George Mariz’s piece on uses of a records survey, and John F. Burns’s piece on lessons from a statewide records survey.
described through this scholarship should assist archivists with collecting followed by records surveys today. We should take care to walk before we can run, evaluating our own materials for current relevance to our own collections, creating their findability through deep and inclusive description, and confirming we are housing materials safely for long-term use and storage. If we are vigilant and successful in working on our own in-house surveys, that information and documentation can more easily be spread and shared through wider records surveys. This will help to fulfill the momentum of collective widespread archival information sharing that Fleckner describes throughout his piece.

So, how do we continue to prioritize the archival survey, both records and collections based, and where does it fall within our day-to-day work? The reality is, as archivists we are probably conducting a series of mini surveys as part of our daily work. But as Fleckner’s piece asserts, the evaluation of our materials and gathering of archival data should be viewed as a necessary and crucial part of collection upkeep, not a fleeting need or practice that should be funded by competing grant applications. By making routine collection surveys part of our archival practice, we will help others to recognize the benefit of information sharing in wider records surveys. The records survey can assist with internal needs, and sharing of that data can provide a connection with other repositories. How that takes shape should be left up to interpretation. A local finding aids central repository... shared conservation practices... a conversation about descriptive practices—the possibilities a records survey can provide are endless.