

**Presentation: “Holistic Collecting: One Big Happy Family”**  
**Paul Eisloeffel, Nebraska State Historical Society**  
**Session: “Proactive Collecting: Setting a Course to Boldly Go”**  
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I have a story for you today. It’s a story about the archives galaxy, one not-so-far-far away. It’s about a broader way to look at that galaxy – thinking outside the archives box, you might say, in regard to collecting.

Most of us here are probably used to an archives housing an artifact or two – or a dozen or two. But many archives are not accustomed to being a sibling in a larger collection family. That’s the gist of my story, because that’s the way it works at the Nebraska State Historical Society. The archival holdings are but a *portion* of the institution’s total collections. They’re not regarded as better or worse – just different, and our parents love us all the same.

Like so many other all-purpose historical societies, the one in Nebraska performs several functions. Among them are:

- Reference services
- Educational programs
- Exhibits
- Conservation
- Archeology (it oversees state projects in particular)
- Historic Preservation (which deals with the built environment)
- Publishing
- . . .and of course collecting, and management of those collections.

Our collections – *all* our collections – are grouped into a single administrative division of the Historical Society. The collecting units are these:

- Historical and cultural artifacts (what we call our Museum Collections)
- Published materials (or, the Library)
- Archeological collections (the results of digs in Nebraska)
- Archives & manuscripts (family papers and corporate records)
- Public records (mostly state and county)
- Photographs
- Audiovisuals (sound recordings and moving images)

Each of these has a curator who oversees it.

What codifies our collecting efforts? We have a *collections POLICY*, which details why we collect, and why we manage the collections the way we do. We have our standard operating procedures for *collections MANAGEMENT*, which are the particulars of how we collect;

essentially the processes we follow for documenting acquisition, description, use, preservation and deaccessioning. Lots of forms in that document. And there's a *collecting PLAN*, which offers guidelines on what we should collect, giving specific strategies toward the enhancement of known strengths and the filling of known deficiencies in our collections.

But rather than go into details of Nebraska's history and how to collect for it (something you're not likely to need to know), I'd rather tell you about what's *not* written down in any plan, procedure or policy. . . .

We curators find that what drives our collecting most is an informal, collegial process, a shared understanding that our collections are greater than the sum of their parts. I call it "holistic collecting."

Here are some examples of the results of this approach:

- A family's home movies, along with the camera and projector they used. The home movies themselves are a terrific one-of-a-kind visual document (this clip shows a WWII scrap drive in Gresham, Nebraska) but all three together tell a story of technology, personal communication, and entertainment.
- Another example is the Arrow Aircraft and Motor Corporation of Lincoln, Nebraska. We have company records, like these Board of Directors minutes and this advertisement. We also have photos (this one from inside the plant). *And* we have the plane: An Arrow Sport biplane they manufactured in 1929. Together these speak of the early days of aircraft manufacturing and aviation better than any one component alone.
- But the best example I could come up with from our collections is materials from the life and work of John Leland Champe. He was long-time head of the Anthropology Department at the University of Nebraska and an eminent archeologist. We not only have his papers, which include his field notes, but artifacts from his digs and published results. We also have photos of digs, sound recordings of some of his lectures and presentations, home movie equipment with which he documented digs, *and* those home movies – all managed by different collecting units of the Historical Society. What a great way to look at the life and work of this man: through textual, physical, audible and visual resources.

Besides the practicality of our holistic collecting approach, there *is* actual theory behind it, which I would characterize it as not so much *Star Trek* as *Star Wars*, because it's a lot like the "Force." In the words of Obi Wan Kenobi, "It surrounds us, and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together." In the galaxy we're visiting today, I think Obi Wan was spot on. Or, if you're a fan of Doctor Who, it's bigger on the inside than the outside.

What we do is shaped by the idea of the "Information Ecosystem." This is a term coined by our esteemed colleague Diane Vogt-O'Connor, writing for the National Park Service publication *Cultural Resources Management* back in 1998. The Information Ecosystem is based on "information ecology," a notion more at home in a school of Business Administration than one

of Library Science. Information ecology means the management of a company's entire information environment, the thinking being that only when an organization can combine and integrate diverse sources of information can it truly realize the full power of that information. Devotees suggest that the ideal information ecologists not only gather, store and retrieve information, but also prune it, provide context, and choose the right presentation medium. Sound familiar?

Vogt-O'Connor takes this thinking and applies it to the world of *cultural resources management*, an umbrella field that includes all of those things I mentioned as functions of the Nebraska State Historical Society, museums, libraries and archives included. She calls these diverse information resources the "Information Ecosystem." "Knowledge workers," as she calls them – archivists, librarians, curators, records managers, archeologists, historians, conservators – all are players in this big, integrated universe of information. And in this ecosystem, integrated *information management* is key. In fact, no profession working alone can ensure the survival of our information. You can see why a diverse organization like the National Park Service would almost *have* to think of itself this way. Vogt-O'Connor says that "in an effective information ecosystem, data (facts and observations), information (data with purpose and context) and knowledge (information plus human understanding) are all managed *holistically*. . . ." Yes, she actually uses the "H" word! Sounds a lot like a cultural heritage version of the Force to me.

The idea of holistic collecting is also locked into the concepts of *informational* and *intrinsic values*. You may recall these from your archives or public history training. *Informational value* has to do with the *content* of the item: What information does it hold about people, places, events, etc. In other words, *how good of a SOURCE is it?* On the other hand is *intrinsic value* – the document's value as a *physical piece of material culture*. This all relates to its age, manufacture, media, condition, use – all the qualities that make any object important. *How good of an ARTIFACT is it?*

Archivists generally see both values in a document, and they're symbiotic – the value of a document's content is enhanced by what the artifact itself tells us, and *vice versa*. To take it a step further, an archival *collection* exhibits both values as well. And of course provenance has a lot to do with this. Now, holistic collecting suggests that these two values are evident in everything. Like the Force, they bind everything together. Documents, objects, artifacts, buildings, art – they're all infused with informational and intrinsic values. And if you can buy into that, it's easy to expand it to include combinations of materials that share a link. One big happy family!

What are the *benefits* of holistic collecting?

- Access: "One stop shopping," in a manner of speaking. Access to the whole resource, no matter what the starting point.
- Research: The whole being greater than the sum of its parts.
- Interpretive programs, such as exhibits, which benefit from the juxtaposition of different media.

- Preservation and storage: Materials are cared for in the space and system best suited for them.

And the *challenges*?

- Individually, a collecting unit (like archives and manuscripts, for example) may take something it wouldn't normally take if offered on its own. But we work in the spirit of the Information Ecosystem. We still view things with an appraising eye, but consider the materials in their entirety. . . just as we all should, all the time.
- The next one's a mixed blessing. On one hand, holistic collecting puts some added burden on the individual curators: to ask about supporting materials that cross those collection unit lines when talking with potential donors. On the plus side, each curator has at least a working knowledge of the nature of the collections in the other collecting units, so they can represent them in first contact with donors.
- Maintaining the links – how do we make sure the materials stay linked intellectually? First, we benefit from all the collecting units being administratively in one division. This makes for good communication among the curators. We employ a division-wide collections management system that links materials at the accession level. And our cataloging reflects additional materials in the other collecting units. For example, on the archives side, our finding aids note the existence of artifacts in the museum.

Now, a quick wrap-up (harkening back to the session description):

- Is holistic collecting *functional*? Yes, almost by default, as we've seen.
- Does it *follow archival concepts*? Certainly. It's true to the notions of informational and intrinsic values. It embraces appraisal of the whole rather than just the parts. And it allows preservation and storage appropriate to the needs of the materials.
- Is it *proactive*? Definitely. It's deliberate. It's collaborative (It makes use of all of our "knowledge workers).” And it enhances the overall value of the collections.

That ends my story. Is it a happy ending? Well, it is for *us*. Can it be for you? Perhaps. Maybe you'll feel differently about the value of artifacts in your holdings. Maybe you can forge partnerships with museums to create a bigger family of information resources. At the very least, I hope you'll take away a greater appreciation for the benefits of holistic collecting.