

Appraisal Policy of the National Archives and Records Administration May 2006

This document is designed to provide agency records management, those responsible for scheduling Federal records, and others interested in NARA's decision process with a fundamental understanding of how the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) determines permanent (or archival) value of Federal records as outlined in NARA Directive 1441, *Appraisal Policy of the National Archives and Records Administration*.

What is the NARA appraisal policy?

The Archivist of the United States has the statutory responsibility, as codified in the Federal Records Act, 44 U.S.C. Chapters 21, 29, and 33, to decide how long records must be retained and which records have archival value. 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." However, not all records that constitute essential evidence possess archival value. It is through the appraisal process that NARA determines the value and thus the final action (disposition) of Federal records that are no longer needed for current Government business.

Appraisal decisions require informed judgments, knowledge of and sensitivity to researchers' interests, recognition of resource considerations, and a willingness to acknowledge and understand comments and views expressed by agencies and the public. NARA Directive 1441, *Appraisal Policy of the National Archives and Records Administration*, as outlined in this brochure, sets out the strategic framework, objectives, and guidelines that NARA uses to facilitate the appraisal process by providing a consistent framework for appraisal decision making.

Permanent records categories

NARA has established an overall high-level framework for the analysis of records to determine whether or not they are permanent.

- Records documenting the rights of citizens
- Records documenting the actions of Federal officials
- Records documenting the national experience

Because many records may fall under these broad categories, NARA establishes additional criteria in order to refine the appraisal process. Examples of permanent records in these categories are those that retain their importance for documenting legal status, rights, and obligations of individuals, groups, organizations, and governmental bodies despite the passage of time; those that enable Federal officials to explain past decisions, form future policy, and be accountable for consequences; those that provide the means for evaluating the effects of Federal actions on individuals, communities, and the natural and man-made environment; and those that contribute substantially to knowledge and understanding of the people and communities of our nation.

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General guidelines

NARA uses a set of questions from NARA 1441 Appendix 1 to provide guidance in decision making, support its appraisal objectives, and provide consistent appraisal judgments that can be readily explained both within NARA and to outside constituents.

- How significant are the records for research?
- How significant is the source and context of the records?
- Is the information unique?
- How usable are the records?
- Do these records serve as a finding aid to other permanent records?
- Do the records document decisions that set precedents?
- Are the records related to other permanent records?
- Do the files contain non-archival records?
- What are the cost considerations for long-term maintenance of the records?
- What is the volume of records?
- Is sampling an appropriate appraisal tool?

Specific guidelines

Some types of records require special consideration in the appraisal process. In conjunction with the General Appraisal Guidelines, under Special Considerations for Selected Types of Records - from NARA 1441 Appendix 2 - NARA has identified:

Personal data

Personal data records are more likely to be appraised as having archival value if the records cover a large percentage of the population or subgroup of the American population (e.g., an ethnic or racial group or residents of a specific region). Researchers also have a high interest in records that contain 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, and other data elements related to the individuals or their families.

Observational data from the physical sciences

Scientific observations are more likely to be appraised as having archival value if:

- Data sets cannot be formulated from other sets of data.
- Metadata or other finding aids are available.
- Data sets are complete and are not dependent on other records.
- Appropriate resources for storage, preservation, and reference service can be provided.

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Environmental health and safety records

Environmental health and safety information is more likely to be appraised as having archival value if:

- The records are significant for documenting medical-related issues or have long-term significance for legal rights or government accountability.
- The records document the evolution of the state of the environment.

Research and Development (R&D) records

Research and Development records are more likely to be appraised as having archival value if they contain:

- Program management records that document the planning, policies, and priorities of research programs.
- Technical reports, conference proceedings, and similar publications that disseminate the findings of projects.

Because the value of project files varies across R&D programs, and because many projects have a very limited focus and project records often are voluminous, a very strong justification is needed to appraise all of an agency's project files as permanent. If selection criteria are to be applied to identify files for permanent retention, the creating agency or organization must devise a practical arrangement for applying the criteria to the records and agree to implement it.

Intrinsic value

Documentary materials, regardless of origin, having intrinsic value are rare and possess qualities and characteristics that make the physical form of the record the only acceptable form for preservation. Under qualities and characteristics of records with intrinsic value – from NARA 1441 Appendix 3 - NARA uses the guidelines below in deciding whether permanent records have intrinsic value and should be retained in their original form:

- Physical form that may be the subject for study if the records provide meaningful documentation or significant examples of the form.
- Aesthetic or artistic quality.
- Unique, curious, or historical physical features or formats.
- Age
- Value for use in exhibits.
- Questionable authenticity, date, author, or other characteristic that is significant and ascertainable by physical examination.

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Definitions

- **Appraisal** - the process of determining the value and thus the final disposition of Federal records, making them either temporary or permanent.
- **Archival value** - the enduring historical or other value that warrants NARA's continued preservation of records beyond the period required to transact the business of the originating agency or its successor in function. Records determined to have archival value are designated on records disposition schedules as "permanent."
- **Intrinsic value** - archival term applied to permanent records that have qualities and characteristics that make the physical form of the record the only acceptable form for preservation.
- **Permanent record** - any Federal record that has been determined by NARA to have sufficient value to warrant its preservation in the National Archives.

For more information on NARA's appraisal guidelines and policies, see:

NARA Directive 1441, *Appraisal Policy of the National Archives and Records Administration* at <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/appraisal.html>

Or, contact your NARA appraisal archivist:

- In the Washington, D.C. area, the Life Cycle Management Division can provide assistance. See *List of NARA Contacts for Your Agency* at: www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/appraisal/index.html.
- In NARA's regional offices, the Records Management Staff can provide assistance. A complete list of NARA's regional facilities can be found at <http://www.archives.gov/facilities/index.html>.

Note: This policy applies only to records subject to the Federal Records Act (FRA) -- records of all executive and legislative branch agencies and the United States District and Circuit Courts. Records created by the President and Presidential entities, Congress, and the Supreme Court are not subject to the FRA and are not covered by NARA 1441.