



Association of Centers for the Study of Congress

## **Best Practices for Centers for the Study of Congress**

Prepared by

Task Force on Best Practices for Establishing a Center  
Association of Centers for the Study of Congress

This document, *Best Practices for Centers for the Study of Congress*, sets a benchmark against which all repositories that collect congressional and other legislative collections may be measured.

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## ***Overview***

The “best practices” recommended in this document are intended to guide the development of (1) repositories engaged in collecting congressional papers and related materials and of (2) entities established to support the education of students, scholars, policy-makers, and members of the general public about the history of Congress, legislative process, and current issues facing Congress. The latter may be public policy centers that are not associated with archival collections. In order to provide the most comprehensive guidance as to “best practices,” this document assumes an ideal center that includes both a public programming component and a collecting component. The public programming component includes education and focuses on outreach encouraging the study of government and the discussion of public policy. The collecting component implements the recognition that collecting the papers of people and organizations is essential to the study of government, politics, and contemporary society. A Center may excel in both areas but often is stronger in one component. Centers may consist of a partnership with other departments and institutions in order to fulfill both functions. This document sets a benchmark against which all repositories that collect congressional and related collections may be measured.

## ***Purpose of a Center for the Study of Congress***

A Center should make public a clear and concise statement of its purpose and, if collecting, define the types of collections it accepts. Centers that emphasize collecting should have as a central element of their collection policy the documentation of Congress. Centers collecting legislative papers typically hold one or more major congressional collections dating from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. A broad collecting theme is encouraged. This should include papers of leaders in government such as governors, ambassadors, and state legislators, as well as political parties, members of party leadership, political journalists and editorial cartoonists, and other organizations that have or have had a role in influencing government, politics or public policy.

## ***Financial Support***

The creation and operation of a Center requires a substantial and long term budgetary commitment. A Center has a responsibility for ensuring preservation of acquired collections and making them available for research according to professional standards and practice. There must be appropriate funding to support staff training, professional development, and administrative travel. It must ensure continued proper support for the archival program by being creative in identifying and securing financial resources. Foremost, the Center must have institutional support and commitment for the program and its success.

The funding of a Center can take a variety of forms. A Center may appear as a line item in the budget of a parent organization, enjoy significant endowed support, and/or receive significant grant funding supporting specific programming. Some organizations, particularly academic organizations, have development officers who work with alumni and other prospects in fund raising. Development officers who are located in libraries often tap into special collections and archives to attract funding and help in collection development. A friends group or advisory board may be a consideration for long-range fundraising, collection development, and programming.

## ***Governance***

Most congressional repositories reside within an existing organization—a university or a government agency, for example. Their governance is well established. In other cases, however, a congressional collection may be the basis for a new organization. In these instances, determining best practices in terms of governance poses a separate challenge. What follows are a few examples of issues to consider in establishing a new congressional center:

**Articles of Incorporation.** Practices for establishing the legal basis for an organization vary from state to state. The Office of the Secretary of State or its equivalent generally provides guidance for incorporation.

**Mission Statement and Bylaws.** Articles of Incorporation typically require a mission statement and a set of bylaws.

**Board of Directors.** Usually, independent organizations require a Board of Directors with fiduciary responsibility for the organization's functionality. A Board of Directors is not an advisory group. Among its primary duties are: (1) recruitment, selection, evaluation, and support of key staff; (2) budget review and adoption, and ongoing monitoring of expenses and income; (3) strategic planning and mission alignment; and (4) board recruitment and replenishment.

**Tax Status.** In order to solicit donor support, a Center will generally establish itself as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization under federal and state tax codes. While state laws will vary, establishing tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service requires submission of its Form 1023 in order to receive a formal letter of determination. Status options range from a publicly supported charity to various types of foundations. The letter of determination will be required in order to receive any federal funding.-

**Financial Records and Accounting Procedures.** Independent organizations face increasing demands from donors and the Internal Revenue Service for accountability in the use of financial resources. Well-documented and enforced financial controls and record-keeping are essential.

The long-term sustainability of a new congressional archival organization depends at least as much on the quality of governance as it does on the organization's collections or financial resources. Time invested early in determining appropriate governance procedures will ensure the organization's future viability.

## ***Space***

Each Center should make public its Building Use Policy and that policy should clearly address what visitors and researchers may and may not do in the Center and provide for a secure environment for materials, staff and patrons. A Center must provide space appropriate for outreach, reference, processing, preservation activity, and records storage. Center space must provide appropriate environmental and security controls.

**Processing Space.** Congressional collections tend to be large and require processing space that allows staff to work with substantial amounts of material at any one time. To process a major congressional collection of 400-3,000 cubic or linear feet, a processing team may require multiple processing stations each measuring a minimum of 7 x 14 feet. Each work station should include work tables, preferably with some accommodation for sorting into at least twelve categories, and have nearby shelving allocated that will store 18-24 feet of material. A large space for communal processing of up to one hundred boxes is desirable. Temperature and humidity should be held to a range similar to that in the Reading Room.

**Stack Space.** Congressional repositories should have space adequate for holdings plus planned growth. This may include off-site annexes. Collections should be stored in archival folders and cartons. Shelving should be of archival quality. Stack space should feature a separate air handling system capable of maintaining a temperature in a range of 60 degrees plus or minus 2 degrees and humidity at 40% plus or minus 5%. Special formats will often require different ranges of temperature and humidity and their own separate shelving environment. Stack space should be secure, access should generally be limited to staff, and the space should be monitored for fire, pests and water. A vault, or its equivalent, should be provided for materials that are exceptionally valuable or sensitive in nature.

**Public Space.** Researchers should be required to identify themselves through a photo ID. Centers should maintain a record of each researcher and the records they study during each visit. In the event of theft, these records provide the only opportunity to identify the users of the stolen records. Only blank paper, laptop computers, and possibly digital cameras should be allowed in the reading room. Researchers should be monitored at all times. The amount of material brought out for a researcher should be limited to one volume or carton at a time and researchers should be instructed not to alter the arrangement of records. Documents of great intrinsic value should be stored separate from the collection and replaced in that collection by a reference copy. The temperature and humidity levels, while not as critical as in the stacks, should be 70 degrees plus or minus 2 degrees and 50% plus or minus 10%.

**Other Public Space.** Centers with active outreach programs benefit from significant meeting and exhibit spaces. These should include a large public room with seating for over one hundred people for major events such as symposia, lectures, gala dinners, etc. and smaller rooms seating fifteen to thirty people for breakout sessions, seminars, and class meetings. These public rooms should provide appropriate technology for the intended audiences, including webcasts, videoconferencing, etc.

**Facility Security.** An independent Center should employ facility security staff to ensure the physical security of the building, the collections, staff, and patrons. Current standards should be met in security staff credentials, training and in security systems. In academic Centers, campus police generally provide security.

## ***Staff***

Center staff will be knowledgeable about the broader aspects of congressional holdings at other Centers and have professional working relationships with other congressional collections repositories as well as the U. S. House of Representatives Office of Art and Archives, the U. S. Senate Historical Office, and the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives.

Centers should employ staff of sufficient education and experience and in sufficient number to engage in a variety of activities. Staff will administer Centers, develop collections, ensure the preservation of historical materials, process collections in a timely fashion and to an appropriate detailed level, provide expert reference service to collections, and engage in educational and public programming outreach. It is common for some overlap to exist for staff working on various Center functions.

**Archival Functions.** Administrators and archivists administering and developing collections for a Center must have broad knowledge of their state's political history and an understanding of the interconnected framework of people, events, and ideas that have shaped, influenced or observed that history. Congressional collections present archivists with great challenges due to their size, the daunting complexity of their subject matter, and the variety of record types within them. Senior archivists should have significant experience in working with large congressional collections and knowledge of the myriad issues involved. Junior staff should receive special training, either in-house or through workshops, in the areas of their work at the repository. It is preferred that archival staff be dedicated to congressional collections rather than sharing responsibility for unrelated collections.

**Outreach Functions.** As the public face of the Center, outreach staff should have understanding of the legislative process and politics and the purpose of archival management. Advanced degrees in such disciplines as education, political science, contemporary American history, journalism or related fields are preferred. Certification in museum studies and actual experience in government, politics, or teaching are also desirable.

## ***COLLECTION MANAGEMENT***

Centers that pursue and acquire congressional and related collections must serve a variety of patrons, ranging from the creators of the collections, their families, teachers, and researchers and scholars of various ages and levels of interest. Centers must also be alert to the needs of future generations of scholars. This diversity of users can create some competing pressures with regard to processing decisions, chiefly when to process and what to discard. For instance, if the donor is continuing to access the collection on a regular basis, and the collection's original order is eccentric, the repository may wish to postpone processing for the benefit of that donor. Conversely, if a teacher is seeking access to an easily processed series within the collection, perhaps speeches, the repository might consider processing that series and opening it for study before completing the entire collection, with the warning that additional speeches might be located and added to the series during later processing.

**Acquisitions.** Centers should be proactive in collecting retrospective and current congressional and related collections. Centers should seek and accept only those collections that fit their collecting policy. Each collection should be accompanied by a clear deed of gift that addresses property and literary rights and any special restrictions required by the donor. Centers should only accept collections that they expect to process completely in a reasonable time. When a collection is received via a deed of deposit, that document should clearly provide a date and/or circumstance under which title to the collection transfers to the Center.

As acquired, congressional collections should be reported to the Center for Legislative Archives, the House Office of Art and Archives, and the Senate Historical Office for inclusion in their guides to research collections. In accessioning collections, many repositories now gather appropriate information, along with the preliminary inventory, to produce collection-level catalog records that are reported to national and international online databases. When the collections are formally arranged and described, these records may be updated.

**Preliminary Inventories.** Many collections received by Centers come from donors who require reference service into their own materials. To allow and facilitate such service, archival staff must compile preliminary inventories of its collections and of any additions received to those collections, in a timely fashion, if such are not received with the collection. This should typically occur within a period of days, weeks, or with collections of hundreds of feet of material, a period perhaps as long as several months. Inventories should be of sufficient detail to allow Center staff to respond promptly to donor requests seeking specific files or documents. In compiling or reviewing the inventory, staff should examine each folder to identify and address, as necessary, any preservation issues present in the collection.

**Restrictions.** Collections should be processed and opened for research as quickly as is feasible, given the constraints of working with donors who are often still active in public life. There are both federal and state laws governing areas of privacy and disclosure. Among the laws most relevant to Centers are U. S. Senate and House Rules, Federal Executive Orders that are appropriate, the Privacy Act of 1974, the Freedom of Information Act, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, and sunshine legislation. There are other laws governing national security, case records, and personnel records.

Collections should be closed to the public until processing has been completed to assure that no classified or other sensitive materials covered by privacy laws are inadvertently made public. Public access to the papers may need to be further restricted for some period of time. Senior archival staff should advise collection donors on the appropriateness of restrictions and negotiate reasonable restrictions that meet the donor's needs and the interests of the public. Typically, personal collections should be closed as long as the donor is active in public life. Records of government officials, such as members of Congress, Cabinet members, and Foreign Service officials, may contain classified records. Such materials may need to be reviewed by a government agency. All



of these decisions require a sophisticated understanding of the issues involved and a close examination of the records.

**Processing and Access.** Even those collections to which access is restricted should be arranged and described in a timely fashion so that staff may have recourse to the donor and his or her former staff with questions that may arise during processing. Definitions of “reasonable” may differ but Centers should process collections at a rate of no less than 200 feet per year. Thus, a Center with two major unprocessed collections should be processing at a rate of at least 400 feet per year. Processing of collections received in good order may progress more quickly.

To provide potential researchers with adequate information regarding the content of collections, descriptions should generally be at the folder level. Some series or folders within series, such as audiovisual materials or speeches, may need to be processed at the item level. All collections should be analyzed at the folder level to assure that no confidential or restricted material is missed. Descriptions should follow current archival standards and be made available on Center websites. Common professional practice is to provide an online standard description for collections giving detailed scope and content notes and box lists with folder titles that are searchable. Collection-level catalog records must be created or updated and reported to national and international online databases.

Some congressional and other related collections may have certain series arranged and described using minimal processing guidelines. Minimal processing should be performed or supervised by experienced staff.

**Audiovisual and Electronic Records.** Centers must have the technical and budgetary ability to preserve and make available audiovisual and electronic records in a wide range of formats. Centers should own or have ready access to the variety of technical equipment required to view or play back the diverse and often outdated audiovisual formats and electronic storage media located in modern congressional collections. Electronic records should be processed upon receipt as follows: 1) Identify and validate the transfer; 2) Provide a brief description of contents supplemented by a directory list and screen shot of e-mail directories (see appendix, How to Save a Directory List by the Senate Historical Office, as example); and 3) Make at least two copies, keeping one on the server and storing the other(s) as far apart physically as possible on separate media (DVDs, CDs, portable hard drives, or Internet storage) that is scheduled for periodic testing for media degradation.

**Oral History.** Centers should establish oral history programs to supplement the documentary record. Narrators should include donors of collections, key staff, and family members. Interviews with other significant narrators whose reflections develop the documentary record and are within the Center’s collection policy are encouraged. Oral histories should be transcribed and the audio or video recordings and transcriptions should be made available on Center websites.

**Preservation and Disaster Planning.** As part of collection management, a Center should have an awareness and knowledge of the preservation needs and required resources to protect and maintain permanently valuable historical records in its holdings. Staff members should keep preservation priority list for at risk materials and monitor environmental conditions regularly. An overview of short and long-term preservation planning is important for keeping the Center's director abreast of the repository's needs.

Centers deal with unique materials which appear in a variety of formats and must recognize that nontextual records are integral to their respective collections and must receive equal and appropriate consideration as necessary for preservation action. Centers should have the capability of conserving and preserving all formats of materials. This can take the form of a conservation lab as a part of the Center or its parent organization, or access to the services of a good lab, or outsourcing work as needed. Centers also must be able to reformat records whose original formats do not lend them to permanent retention, whether photocopying thermofaxes and newspaper clippings onto acid-free paper, digitizing selected documents, or migrating electronic records to servers and/or external hard drives. Qualified staff and institutional IT (Instructional Technology) support are crucial in supporting these preservation activities.

Centers should have formal disaster plans in place. These plans must address both containment and recovery for the overall facility and its archival holdings. At a minimum, Disaster Preparedness should ensure that staff is familiar with the Disaster Manual, maintain and update that manual, keep the staff alert to disaster procedures and any changes in those procedures, and arrange for regular training of staff in use of fire extinguishers and/or other recovery skills as needed.

### ***Outreach***

Centers have an obligation to encourage the scholarly study of their holdings and improve the general public's understanding of government, politics and public policy. A wide and ever-growing range of outreach efforts is available to Centers through public programming such as symposia, lectures, publication, K-12 curriculum tools, videoconferencing and webcasting. Programs of rotating in-house and online exhibits should be designed to appeal to a wide variety of patrons, from the school child to post-graduate scholars to retirees interested in learning more about their government. Centers should promote themselves through robust websites that allow searching of collection descriptions, digital publications and exhibits. Centers should endeavor to fund financial awards to subsidize travel to and research at the repository.

### ***Donor Relations***

Centers should establish ongoing relations with the congressional members of their state and others upon which their collection development policy is based. Centers should encourage these legislators and others as appropriate to commit their papers to an archival repository early in their career and to institute records management policies within their offices. Centers should be in contact with these offices to advise staff about best practices in records management and to assist in the identification of records with permanent historical value.

## ***Assessment***

Centers should monitor their performance using some regular method to assess the effectiveness of their public programming and archival endeavors and should make public the results of this assessment.

## ***Resources***

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