

## **MODULE 16**

# ACCESSIONING DIGITAL ARCHIVES

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**SOCIETY OF  
American  
Archivists**

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## **Case Study 2: Accessioning in a Time Crunch: Developing Accessioning Procedures during a State Government Transition**

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In January 2015, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts underwent a change of gubernatorial administrations. The incumbent governor, Deval Patrick, had chosen not to seek re-election, and the voters had elected Charles “Charlie” Baker to fill the executive office. The transition marked not only a change in personage, but also a switch in the political affiliation of top leadership. As part of the transition, the state archives was tasked with the transfer and accessioning of the Patrick administration’s records of enduring value. For the first time in the history of the Massachusetts Archives, this transfer included electronic records.

Massachusetts General Law stipulates the existence of a Records Conservation Board (RCB) that oversees the creation, management, and implementation of the Statewide Agencies Records Retention Schedule. Additionally, the RCB reviews all requests for the transfer of records to the Massachusetts Archives. Similar boards or review panels are common in state and local government settings, but they represent another step in the records transfer process that may be unfamiliar to archivists outside a governmental setting. In Massachusetts, the RCB is comprised of the supervisor of public records, state archivist, state librarian, attorney general, state comptroller, and commissioner of the administration, or designees of these officers. In this system, any accession includes the participation of more than just the creator, producer, and archives; it also includes the RCB. The archives acquires legal custody of an accession only after the RCB’s review and approval of the transfer.

For all practical purposes, the retention schedule serves as the collection policy for the archives. Records series designated for permanent disposition are eligible to be transferred to the archives. While the retention schedule is stated to be format-neutral, this was the first time that the RCB was asked to review a request for a transfer that included electronic records. Extra time and attention was required to complete the necessary transfer documentation to ensure that the electronic records, approximately one terabyte of data representing over a dozen different records series, were complete and accurate.

Complicating matters further, the nature of government dictates that the work of governing must continue through the transition

period between the election of a new governor and his or her inauguration. The records were in active use right up to the point of transfer, and this added to an overall sense of urgency. For example, a photographer from Governor Patrick's press office was taking photographs right through the Baker inauguration. The form that the RCB used to approve transfer of records included detailed information about which records schedule was being cited, as well as the volume of records—physical or digital—that would be included. Obviously, it is difficult to fill out a transfer form for materials that have not been created yet. A special session of the RCB was convened to allow for review of the transfer forms, and in some cases it was necessary to estimate the final volume of the materials.

It was also important to consider that some records were not going to be transferred to the archives during the administration transition. Unlike manuscript collections, government records and the activities that they document transcend a single person or administration. There is no distinct break in the basic functions of governing, and the records of one administration may remain active and relevant for subsequent administrations. This highlights the importance of thinking of the records as generated by the Office of the Governor rather than by a specific administration.

Despite beginning the conversation about the records transfer nine months in advance, there was only one opportunity to accomplish the necessary records capture, particularly in regard to various governor's office social media accounts such as Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr. These accounts were wiped of all Governor Patrick's content within a week of the inauguration. Additionally, with the change of party affiliation came a higher than usual turnover of key staff members during the transition period as staffers sought other employment. Thankfully, two key staff members who were designated as liaisons for the records transfer remained right through Governor Patrick's last day.

In the flurry of activity that occurs during an administration transition, advanced preparation is always the goal. It may not always be possible. To ensure that the process goes well, clear and concise guidelines for how to prepare and enact the transfer itself should be easily available to the producer. Once the new administration takes over, it is never too soon to begin talking to the new producer about information governance and records management to ensure that the next change in administrations goes smoothly.