

Keeping what counts

Should limited-life foundations create archives?

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Introduction

When a foundation chooses to wind down and close its doors, it confronts a range of new questions. The most obvious relate to when it should close and what it should do in the time remaining. A major focus is on getting results for the grantees and communities it serves. But as programs conclude and grant dollars dwindle, foundations will at some point confront the question of what to leave behind. In approaching that question, some consider establishing a foundation archive.

As the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation prepared for its final chapter, it considered establishing an archive. To inform that decision, a cross-functional task force reviewed available research on foundation archives, studied the archiving practices of other limited-life foundations, and spoke with experts at four archival research centers.¹ The goal was to better understand what, how, and why foundations archive.

We learned that funders preserve their knowledge for different purposes and in different ways.² Some have sought to make significant contributions to the history of philanthropy by placing documents and other artifacts in established archives housed within universities or other institutions. Others have found ways to make relevant knowledge available through third-party communication channels that serve their specific audiences and issue areas. Some have employed a mix of these or other approaches.

We also learned that creating an archive is hard work and can involve significant expense. In other words, there are clear tradeoffs when considering the benefits and costs of archiving information.

While there is no common playbook when it comes to archiving, foundations considering an archive might ask:

- 1 Do we have knowledge or experience that could benefit others?
- 2 Which people, organizations, and networks do we most want to reach with that knowledge?
- 3 Is an archive the right or best way to reach them?

Knowing something about the role of archives and the opportunities and challenges associated with creating and maintaining them is a good place to start.

¹ In addition to learning from the websites of five limited-life foundations, staff reviewed case studies and conducted interviews to understand the archival decisions of the Orfalea Foundation, the AVI CHAI Foundation, and The Atlantic Philanthropies. Staff also interviewed archival professionals at the Rockefeller Archive Center, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, and the California Historical Society.

² In 2017, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) interviewed leaders of 11 foundations sunsetting between 2016 and 2026. The study found that while most of these foundations wanted to preserve their knowledge to share lessons learned, there was no clear point when they finalized their archiving plans, and they did not adopt a uniform approach to knowledge preservation. From: The Center for Effective Philanthropy. [A Date Certain: Lessons from Limited Life Foundations](#). 2017.

What Foundations Leave Behind: Archives in Context

As limited-life foundations wrestle with the question of what to leave behind, they can highlight their knowledge through a range of platforms.

- **Foundation websites:** Websites can be tailored to funders' knowledge-sharing goals and live on for years at minimal cost. The websites of five closed foundations considered for this analysis are retrospective in nature. While they vary in design and format, they feature similar information, including detail on grantmaking programs, grantee highlights, spend-down reflections, and evaluation reports.

EXAMPLES: WEBSITES OF CLOSED FOUNDATIONS

The Beldon Fund closed in May 2009. Its website hosts resources on the practical implications of the foundation's sunset, a final impact assessment conducted five years after closure, and independent evaluations of Beldon's strategies and results.

beldon.org

The Noyce Foundation closed at the end of 2015. For a time, the foundation hosted a website with information on its initiatives, a final report, videos about grantees, and a repository for the foundation's annual reports. As of September 2018, however, the site's landing page had disappeared, suggesting that it is no longer maintained.

The Orfalea Foundation closed at the end of 2015. Its website features case studies, evaluations, multimedia, and data about its impact. It also links to a Fall 2015 supplement to the Stanford Social Innovation Review, which Orfalea sponsored to detail lessons learned through its grantmaking.

orfaleafoundation.org

Orfalea preserved its original, pre-sunset website in a separate web archive.

archive.orfaleafoundation.org

The Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies closed in 2016. Its website includes details on the foundation's spend-down strategy, a report reflecting its thirty years of philanthropy, and a library featuring knowledge products related to its grantmaking areas.

acbp.net

The Hagedorn Foundation closed at the end of 2017. Its website has pages about what it funded, research and publications it commissioned, and a 20-chapter retrospective telling its story.

hagedornfoundation.org

- **Online knowledge hubs:** Independent knowledge hubs serve a variety of audiences. For example, [IssueLab](#) preserves knowledge for the social sector across dozens of issue areas, while platforms like [GrantCraft](#), [LearnPhilanthropy](#), and others curate knowledge on philanthropic practice. Regardless of their scope, these hubs enable funders to contribute to broad bodies of knowledge on platforms that may be better known, frequented, and sustained than the isolated websites of closed foundations. They can also help funders expand beyond the sometimes insular practice of peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, which can be difficult for outsiders to access or influence.
- **Partners:** Limited-life foundations may rely on their grantees, co-funders, and other partners to house and even actively disseminate crucial knowledge following sunset. For knowledge that has been produced by grantees or in partnership with another funder, the chances are good that it will continue to have a home separate from a foundation website, knowledge hub, or archival repository. Some funders will also rely on curation partners to host knowledge they independently create.
- **Archives:** Formal foundation archives preserve records of foundation programs, activities, products, governance, people, and history.³ Unlike websites and knowledge hubs that are used to provide ongoing access to selective content via reports, essays, video, and other media created for external audiences, archives are typically a more comprehensive repository of primary source materials that may be of historical interest to researchers and practitioners. They are often the product of formal records retention policies and may be managed by professional archivists who assess, organize, and control access to materials. Archives can be housed internally or at independent archival centers, museums, libraries, or universities.⁴

Of course, funders may use more than one knowledge-sharing channel, understanding that each will serve different strategic needs and audiences. Creating an archive is one of the most ambitious options and deserves careful consideration.

THE COMMONWEALTH FUND'S SURVEY ON ARCHIVING

A survey commissioned in 2012 by The Commonwealth Fund, a private foundation based in New York, sheds light on the landscape of foundation archives and provides valuable context for this essay. The survey's sample included 300 foundations with assets greater than \$240 million in the 2009–12 period. A total of 97 of those foundations agreed to participate in the survey. Their responses help to clarify why some foundations create archives while others do not, and how the characteristics of foundation archives vary.

Findings from the survey appear throughout this essay. The full survey results can be found in the following report: John E. Craig, Jr. [The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species](#). The Commonwealth Fund. 2012.

³ John E. Craig, Jr. [The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species](#). The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.2.

⁴ [What Are Archives?](#) Society of American Archivists.

The Benefits and Challenges of Establishing Archives

WHY ARCHIVE?

Proponents of archiving cite its capacity to strengthen philanthropic accountability, amplify foundations' stories and learning, and preserve history.

Philanthropic accountability:

Archives can strengthen public accountability by revealing a foundation's internal workings. James Allen Smith, Vice President and Director of Research and Education at Rockefeller Archive Center, says, "Foundation archives tell us how organizations are working to provide public benefits" and "why they succeed or fail." Smith believes that archives provide even greater transparency than 990-PFs and annual reports, and that they strengthen independent assessments of the work of the philanthropic sector.⁵

A tangential benefit to archives is that they can help foundations respond to criticism. John Craig, former Executive Vice President of The Commonwealth Fund, explains, "If you don't have archives to let people see what you did, you're often not positioned to defend yourself."⁶

Foundations' stories and learning:

Archives, and the raw materials they contain, can help foundations refine their stories and communicate lessons learned. Joanne Florino, former project lead for The Atlantic Philanthropies Archives at Cornell University, writes that Atlantic's archive "offers a unique and comprehensive record to be mined – in conjunction with documentary evidence – to drive and share Atlantic's impact and lessons after it closes its doors."⁷ Without archives, foundations' efforts to recall their own histories may fail to paint a full and accurate picture of their grantmaking.

In similar ways, archives can also benefit foundations that are still active. For instance, the Ford Foundation relied on its archive in preparations for the foundation's 75th anniversary events in 2011,⁸ and for data in an evaluation that led to a reorientation of its international programs.⁹

History:

John Craig describes archives as "an aid to understanding the past to wisely shape the future."¹⁰ Leaders in the field likewise believe that archives play an important role in illuminating the history of places that foundations support. This includes details about nonprofits and the ways in which foundations influence social movements.

Foundation archives also contribute to a broader understanding of the history of philanthropy; the Rockefeller Archive Center describes itself as a "major repository and research center for the study of philanthropy and its impact throughout the world."¹¹

^{5, 6, 8, 10} Emily Keller. [Preparing for the Future of Philanthropy by Learning From Its Past: Foundation Archives as a Vehicle for Transparency, Accountability, and Knowledge Transfer](#). Transparency Talk. Foundation Center. Dec. 20, 2012.

⁷ [The Atlantic Philanthropies and Its Archives: Limited Life, Enduring Legacy](#). The Atlantic Philanthropies. Feb. 2, 2017.

⁹ Alan Divack. [Advice on Archives from a Knowledge Manager: A Q&A with Alan Divack](#). Transparency Talk. Foundation Center. Mar. 28, 2013.

¹¹ [Rockefeller Archive Center](#). Website.

WHY NOT ARCHIVE?

Despite the potential benefits of archives, some foundations choose not to create formal archives for reasons that range from the practical to the strategic.

Time and cost:

Establishing an archive requires careful planning and resources. It means consulting with archival professionals, developing protocols for document preservation, allocating funds for establishing and maintaining the archive, reaching an agreement with a repository, and determining what materials will be accessible. Due to the extensive preparations required, professional archivists advise that it is helpful to start the planning process several years prior to sunset.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, The Commonwealth Fund's survey on archiving reports that some funders elect not to archive primarily because they have limited staff time, opt to prioritize programs rather than recordkeeping, and doubt that historical records are important enough to preserve. Funders in the survey also cited financial costs as well as concerns related to privacy as reasons not to archive.¹²

Fees to establish an archive at a library or research center can vary widely and will depend on document volume and the extent of maintenance required. The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley reported a one-time fee of \$100 per box of documents archived. The Commonwealth Fund found that among the foundations it surveyed, the average annual cost of archives was \$60,000.¹³ Large foundations have at times established multi-million-dollar endowments to support their archives in perpetuity.

"The preservation and indexing of records are [essential parts] of the spend-down process. But they are complicated and time-consuming; they typically can't be handled responsibly if deferred until the final months when trustees and staff are no longer able to direct and oversee the sorting and disposition of records and the many steps necessary to making them available to scholars and the public ... AVI CHAI has given itself several years in which to collect and catalogue its documentary history and arrange a secure, permanent home for it."

– Account of the AVI CHAI Foundation's archiving experience, from Joel Fleishman, Professor of Law and Public Policy Sciences, Duke University¹⁴

Audience alignment:

Another reason to forego archiving is if there is not a clear match between the audiences that an archive would serve and the audiences the foundation seeks to reach. Foundation archivists report that the most frequent users include academics, specialists in select professional fields (e.g., museum curators, city planners), journalists, and others with historical research interests. These may not be the chief audiences of concern to foundations. And, as with any communications channel, there is no guarantee that an archive will attract regular patrons of any type; demand for a collection will depend on what the archives contain, where they are housed, and who has access. For example, if a prospective repository has just a few foundation archives in its collection (as many do), it may struggle to attract audiences with a general interest in the philanthropic sector.

¹² John E. Craig, Jr. *The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species*. The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.9.

¹³ John E. Craig, Jr. *The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species*. The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.12.

¹⁴ Joel L. Fleishman. *Shifting the Spend-Down into High Gear: A Foundation Begins Implementing its Strategy*. November 2011. Center for Strategic Philanthropy and Civil Society. Sanford School Of Public Policy, Duke University.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that some foundations set up archives in ways that are designed to reach social sector practitioners and the public. For example, The Atlantic Philanthropies, which established its archives at Cornell University, prioritized digitization, outreach, and curated storytelling in making its archives relevant to broad audiences. Naturally, efforts like these require investments that may be more feasible for larger foundations. Atlantic awarded a \$4 million grant to Cornell to create physical and digital archives over a five-year period. Separately, Atlantic forged partnerships with a variety of entities that could curate its knowledge and reach audiences that might learn from Atlantic's experience. Such partners included Bridgespan, which conducts research on "big-bet grantmaking"; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, which consults with donors around "giving while living"; and Fast Company, which produces journalism coverage of philanthropy.

Implementation challenges:

For some foundations, the merits of archives as complete and accessible repositories may be elusive. To begin with, a quality archive depends on a long-term commitment to records retention on the part of the donor, without which the repository may represent just a partial record of a foundation's business. For foundations with large amounts of documentation, the work of processing it may be significant. And, with the explosion of digital records, archivists may struggle to preserve documents in the face of obsolete hardware and software, the proliferation of files through backups, and the challenge of working with uncompressed files.¹⁵ Finally, while foundations serious about establishing archives can allocate the necessary resources, archives without endowments may become a liability for a repository to maintain over time.

"The digital world is changing the nature of records and record-keeping. In some ways it is easier to save material than ever before. But without good records management, digital knowledge curation can also be chaotic and costly to execute. So, in a sense, digital archives are a major challenge for the archival profession and for foundations seeking to preserve their records. Paper records once provided an impetus for foundations to find repositories long before sunseting because they would often run out of room to store paper files. That is no longer as big an issue as it once was. It is easier for foundations to postpone decisions about the fate of digital records until they consider shutting down. This makes archival decision-making and planning more complex."

– Lee Hiltzik, Senior Research Associate, Rockefeller Archive Center

WHY ARCHIVE?

Archives can strengthen a foundation's:

- Public accountability and transparency
- Ability to share its stories and learning
- Contributions to social and political history

WHY NOT ARCHIVE?

Archives may prove to be:

- Time consuming and costly to establish
- Of interest to narrow audiences
- Challenging to implement and maintain

¹⁵ Smithsonian Institution Archives. [Digital Preservation Challenges and Solutions](#).

THE S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION'S KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT JOURNEY

As the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation planned for its sunset, staff seriously considered establishing an archive. Four years before closing its doors, the Foundation created a knowledge management and archiving task force with membership spanning several departments to consider this question in the context of what to leave behind. What that task force learned about archives is distilled in this essay.

After conducting research and deliberating internally, the Foundation ultimately chose not to establish a formal archive. It instead chose to focus on sharing selective learning and insights about philanthropic practice and its grantmaking areas, chiefly for fellow funders and nonprofits. To that end, the Foundation has:

- Engaged a team of grantees, colleagues, and consultants for feedback on the Foundation's spend-down process and knowledge-sharing plans.
- Used its website to share [resources](#) on foundation exits, evaluation, organizational resiliency, working with consultants, and capital grants, as well as retrospective reports on past grantmaking areas.
- Published its reflections on effective practice in evaluation in a spend-down context and research on exiting grant relationships responsibly in [The Foundation Review](#).
- Partnered with the [National Center for Family Philanthropy](#) to refresh and re-launch its knowledge center with curated resources on spend downs and exits, and to convene a peer network of funders regarding limited life.
- Provided grants data to [Candid](#) (formerly Foundation Center) twice annually since 2016 through the eReporting program, and published grants data on the Foundation's website through [Foundation Maps](#).
- Published evaluation reports and other knowledge products on [IssueLab](#).
- Encouraged grantees to serve as stewards and disseminators of Foundation-funded knowledge products.

The Foundation's knowledge-sharing approach remains a work in progress. However, by starting to craft it four years prior to sunset, the Foundation gave itself time to iterate on what works, understand what its audiences want to know, and identify where best to reach them.

How and Where Archives Live

For foundations that do opt to archive, several choices emerge regarding what the archive should hold, where it should be stored, and the extent to which its contents should be accessible. The Commonwealth Fund survey suggests that where foundation archives do exist, they come in many shapes and sizes.¹⁶

What archives contain:

According to experts, while foundation archives have no uniform makeup, they often include program files such as letters of interest and correspondence; financial records; board meeting minutes; annual reports; foundation publications; and other materials detailing the foundation's philosophy and approach to giving. Formats include paper documents; photographs; microfilm; film; digital data; and oral histories with trustees, staff, and/or grantees.

Some archival professionals report that grant files articulating what a foundation supports and why often comprise the most valuable knowledge in a repository. However, depending on a foundation's preservation and access policies, some repositories' grant files may not tell the full story of its grantmaking practices. For instance, records of a foundation's key decisions may reside in the email correspondence and notes of program officers, which are not always retained.

Where archives are stored:

Among Commonwealth Fund survey respondents with archives, 67% manage archives internally; 17% store them in independent nonprofit archival centers; 9% in a historical society, museum, or research library; and 7% in colleges and universities.¹⁷

External repositories tend to attract collections from a variety of foundations. For example, the Rockefeller Archive Center holds the archives of more than 20 mid- and large-sized foundations across the country, both living and closed. Meanwhile, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) holds the archives of 12 small- and mid-sized foundations, many of which are Indianapolis-based. Indeed, some foundations may be more inclined to donate their materials to a repository that has a meaningful connection – geographic or otherwise – to the donor/founder.

What records can be accessed:

Foundation archives also vary in their access policies. The Rockefeller Archive Center provides access to researchers with appointments, while IUPUI makes most of its collections open to the public. The California Historical Society Library is also open to the public, but only for 12 hours a week. And, some archives that are publicly accessible restrict certain materials at the request of the donor. In The Commonwealth Fund survey, 11% of respondents with archives provide unrestricted access to all documents, 20% provide open access to most records with restrictions on sensitive materials, 47% provide access on a case-by-case basis, and 22% keep their archives closed to researchers.

¹⁶ John E. Craig, Jr. *The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species*. The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.10.

¹⁷ John E. Craig, Jr. *The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species*. The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.11.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO BEGIN

As a starting point for funders that choose to archive, three guidelines will help initiate the complex process.

1. Start the planning process early.

Before making assumptions about what or what not to keep, archivists recommend starting the planning process early – ideally several years before the foundation's sunset date. Planning should include careful consideration of the goals, benefits, and drawbacks of archiving. It can take place in partnership with archival professionals and be informed by dialogues with other foundations that have established archives. Discussions about what to preserve and how to do so should engage staff across foundation functions – from the office of the president to grants management and program teams. Many of these staff would need to coordinate efforts to identify and implement archiving requirements.

2. Select a repository with care.

For foundations that choose to engage external repositories, John Craig of The Commonwealth Fund recommends several questions for assessing fit.¹⁸ Some of these include:

- Does the archive already hold collections from organizations that provide valuable context for the foundation's archive?
- Can the repository meet the foundation's expectations regarding records processing, curation, and openness to researchers?
- Does the archive possess the capacity and expertise to manage and provide access to digital records?

Ideally, a repository should be selected early enough to participate in determining what to retain. That process may begin with a historical appraisal of the foundation's materials.

3. Consider record restriction policies that balance transparency and business needs.

Some foundations may wish to restrict access to certain records for a period of time, particularly if they contain sensitive material. For example, The Atlantic Philanthropies chose to archive its board minutes and the email of its CEOs, but restricted access to those files for several years. Alan Divack, former Senior Project Manager at the Ford Foundation, argues that preservation and access policies should balance the needs of the public and researchers to have access to information with the needs of foundations to conduct business and make decisions. He observes an essential irony: "If there are no restrictions and the presumption is that all records should be open to researchers at once, I think that records creators are less likely to create, capture, and maintain the kinds of information that will be of use to researchers."¹⁹

¹⁸ John E. Craig, Jr. *The Archives of U.S. Foundations: An Endangered Species*. The Commonwealth Fund. 2012. p.18.

¹⁹ Alan Divack. *Advice on Archives from a Knowledge Manager: A Q&A with Alan Divack*. Transparency Talk. Foundation Center. Mar. 28, 2013.

Conclusion

This essay seeks to clarify the variety of tradeoffs that emerge when a foundation considers creating an archive to preserve its knowledge. Naturally, as the practice of archiving continues to evolve in tandem with trends in foundation communications and knowledge management, questions about knowledge preservation examined throughout this essay will need to be revisited. And importantly, no two foundations will opt for the exact same knowledge preservation strategy.

However, it is the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation's hope that fellow funders will continue to ask themselves and one another candid questions about what, how, and with whom they want to share their knowledge, and that they share what they learn along the way.

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