Preface

*A people who cannot document their rights cannot exercise them.*

- John W. Carlin, Archivist of the United States, September 15, 2000

Three recent trends threaten the integrity of the records of Congress. First, the volume and complexity of individual members’ records are increasing dramatically, while members typically are finding less time to oversee the preservation of these materials. Second, over the past five years, the nearly revolutionary conversion to electronic records in member and committee offices poses major new challenges for the preservation of this inherently unstable form of information storage. And finally, seemingly random dispersal of members’ papers to numerous institutions within each state is seriously impeding efforts to organize strong, state-based public-service resources centers. The following report further identifies these disturbing trends and provides a framework for ensuring that the American people continue to have full and timely access to useful information about the work of the United States Congress.

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C. Funding Preservation

*Building a Modern Political Collection*

As an example of one way to address the larger preservation issue of providing adequate funding, the Advisory Committee includes the following discussion. It was first presented at a Congressional Papers Roundtable meeting in 1999 by Herbert Hartsook, Curator of Modern Political Collections at the University of South Carolina.

In 1991, the University of South Carolina established a Modern Political Collections Division in the South Caroliniana Library. Its purpose is to collect and preserve manuscript collections documenting contemporary South Carolina and, specifically, government at the state and national levels and politics within the state. The Division encourages scholarly research in its collections that include the papers of South Carolina’s leaders in the state, the General Assembly, and Congress, as well as of Cabinet members. The division also collects the papers of political parties, organizations impacting on the political scene, and editorial cartoonists. Significant collections are
received every year. There is an active oral history program with donors, key associates, and their staff as narrators, many of whom become good supporters of the documentary program.

Recognizing that legislative collections place unique demands upon repositories because of their size, complexity and variety of special media, the university is working to create an endowment to support Modern Political Collections. The current goal is $1,000,000, and they are nearly half-way there. (It requires $700,000 to fund a temporary full-time staff position and $150,000 to fund a graduate assistantship.) Modern Political Collections has been aggressive about seeking funding support both for the endowment and to meet the exceptional costs of processing. About half of their living donors have underwritten the costs of processing their own collections. Endowment proceeds will fund a full-time position devoted expressly to political collections to supplement the current staff of two, as well as a graduate assistantship and research awards to scholars interested in twentieth century politics and government.

In many ways, the USC’s Modern Political Collections Division qualifies as a model documentation program. The program’s broad collecting focus has allowed it to successfully document contemporary political history in South Carolina. It clearly appeals to donors (who can be assured that their political collection will be well cared for and used), the researchers (who will find numerous subject-related collections in one convenient location), and to university administrators (who benefit from the program’s national recognition and donor financial support). Successful fund raising has resulted in the Division achieving a relatively high-profile status within the university, which in turn brings additional support from donors. Donors are happy placing their collections in a well-respected repository that garners support from a variety of sources. Those who are still serving receive excellent records management and preservation assistance from the repository. The repository is able to become acquainted with the members’ staffs, is able eventually to conduct oral history interviews with them, and thus furthers their goal of acquiring the best possible documentation and enhanced personal support. At the base of the program is positive and sustained collaborative engagement between the repository and its present and future collection donors.

Other ways to lower the total costs

The Advisory Committee recognizes that while successful fund raising requires careful ground work and may not be possible in every instance, members can contribute in other ways that help to lower the repository’s total costs. By hiring a staff archivist or records manager, members can provide for improved records management, pre-processing of the collection, and preliminary preservation. They also may “designate” a repository early in their career so that the repository may begin to work with the office on a range of records management, appraisal, and preservation issues. By regularly communicating with their state congressional delegation, repositories can reinforce better records management and provide guidance on their documentation priorities.

Besides the University of South Carolina, there are other known examples of institutions that focus on public policy collections. They include: the Alan K. Simpson Institute for Western Politics and Leadership at the University of Wyoming; the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro; the California State Archives; the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center at the University of
Oklahoma; Emory University; the Everett McKinley Dirksen Congressional Leadership Center; Leon and Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy at California State University at Monterey Bay; Louisiana State University; the Minnesota Historical Society; the P.K. Yonge Library at the University of Florida; the Richard Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia; the Robert J. Dole Institute for Public Service and Public Policy at the University of Kansas; Rutgers University; the Thomas J. Dodd Center at the University of Connecticut; the Thomas S. Foley Institute for Public Policy and Public Service at Washington State University; the University of Alaska; the University of Arkansas; the University of Delaware; the University of Hawaii; the University of Rhode Island; the University of Washington; the University of Vermont; and the Wendell H. Ford Research Center and Public Policy Archives at the University of Kentucky.

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