

# The Status of College and University Archives

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IN 1966 the College and University Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists undertook the first comprehensive survey of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. The purpose was to ascertain, first, if an institutional archives existed, and, second, something about the nature and scope of the operation. In previous years there had been surveys of archival developments of segments of the higher education community.<sup>1</sup> These studies had produced much useful information, but they did not encompass all institutions of higher learning in the United States and Canada. The 1966 survey was able with but very few exceptions to reach every accredited college and university in the two countries. In all, 46 institutions in Canada and 1,156 in the United States were surveyed.

To carry out the work required the efforts of a small platoon of 44 volunteers. The data were obtained by means of a questionnaire, which though far from perfect was simple enough to encourage wide response and provided a considerable amount of significant information. The questionnaire elicited a wide variety of responses, some irritating, some humorous, nearly all useful. One miniscule college in Pennsylvania returned the unfilled questionnaire with a polite but haughty letter stating that because so many questionnaires had been received it had adopted the policy of answering none of them. One of the volunteers received a caustic letter from the archivist of one of the wealthiest institutions in the country complaining of the lack of a stamped return envelope. In another instance the chairman of the committee had to cool the ire of the president of a rather prestigious institution who was quite angry over what he felt was a misinterpretation of the data supplied by his institution. These were the exceptions, however. The general response was friendly, conscientious, and sincere.

The data supplied give us the rough outlines of the state of the archival profession within colleges and universities. Of the institutions contacted, one in Canada and 320 in the United States did not respond to the questionnaire. Undoubtedly the principal reason for the failure of most of these institutions to reply was the fact that they had nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight H. Wilson, "Report of the Committee on College and University Archives," in *American Archivist*, 13:63 (Jan. 1950); Philip P. Mason, "College and University Archives: 1962," in *American Archivist*, 26:161-165 (Apr. 1963). The 1949 survey included 150 institutions; the 1962 survey, 350.

resembling an archives. Eighteen institutions in Canada and 278 in the United States responded to the questionnaire with the frank admission that they had no formal archives, or their replies made it quite evident that this was the case. On the other hand the survey brought out the fact that 27 institutions in Canada and 558 in the United States claimed to have some type of archives connected with their institutions. These figures indicate that 58.7 percent of Canadian institutions and 48.3 percent of American institutions have archives.<sup>2</sup> These percentages, indicating that archival institutions have been established in about half of the colleges and universities, afford some reason for optimism regarding the growing strength of this type of archival institution.

Closer examination of the data, however, offers a discouraging picture. The first and most important qualifying fact relates to operation of archives by professional personnel. In the United States and Canada there are only 53 institutions (representing 9 percent of institutions with archives) that employ at least one full-time archivist of professional standing. To be sure, a number of additional institutions had the equivalent of one full-time professional, but the fact remains that there are only a very few full-time professional college archivists.

Unfortunately we know little about the training and background of this group of professionals. Judging from their addresses, most archives, not surprisingly, are part of the library system; probably four-fifths of them are. A parallel survey of colleges and universities in the West, conducted by James V. Mink of the University of California, Los Angeles, confirmed this trend more precisely. Seventy percent of university archivists and 56 percent of college archivists, he found, were administratively part of the library system; 12 percent and 23 percent, respectively, were a part of administration (president's office etc.); and 18 percent and 19 percent, respectively, were in neither system.

It would appear from the survey that most college "archivists" are in fact librarians who must manage the institution's records as a part-time or even incidental function of their activities. One respondent from a Nebraska archives gave her time fraction for her archival duties as 0.001 percent with the added explanation, "She comes in three times a year to dust." Undoubtedly many other reporting archives receive little better attention.

Descriptions of holdings were of the most general in nature. Nearly all kept both manuscript and printed files relating to their institutions. Most also maintained picture files. About one-third of those institutions with archives maintained files of senior, honor, or masters' theses and Ph. D. dissertations. Collections of personal papers of faculty were

<sup>2</sup> The 1949 report showed that 56 of 150 or 37 percent had archives; the 1962 report showed that 113 of 350 or 32.3 percent had archives. Though a decline is reflected from 1949 to 1962, this result is probably attributable to the broader sample of the second survey.

largely though not exclusively found in the larger institutions. Sometimes strange things were reported to be in the archives—in one case “Roman documents,” in another the “spade for breaking ground of new buildings,” and in many class relics. “The official college archives,” wrote the librarian of a New England institution, “could more rightly be called a morgue. Documents of college records of all sorts . . . are stuffed in odd boxes and filing cases in an attic.”

Amount of holdings affords another important factor in analyzing the significance of the archival program. Though there are significant exceptions, there apparently is a relatively high correlation between size of archives and institutional prestige. The more imposing the academic reputation, the larger the archival holdings at the college or university.

Most archives are small: only 149 institutions or 25 percent of the 585 institutions have holdings in excess of 100 ft. Raise the figures to those institutions with over 1,000 ft. of records and you have a select group of 26 (4.4 percent)—2 Canadian, the remainder in the United States. Harvard is in a class by itself with 30,000 ft. of records. Second largest is the University of Pennsylvania with 12,000, and third is the University of Wisconsin with 8,000.

A commendable feature of most college archives is their open availability on a regular basis to interested scholars. Only 17 institutions are not open at all. Fifty are available for research only to persons within the institution, and the remaining 454 are completely open or open with modest limitations.

From the 1966 survey it is apparent that college and university archives are still in the developmental stage. For most institutions the management of archives is a side function of the library. Full-time college archivists are rare. Holdings except for two or three dozen large institutions are relatively small. These negative conclusions should not obscure the most important fact that there is general acceptance by higher educational institutions in the United States and Canada of the idea of preserving their archives—a statement which could not have been made two decades ago.

The survey also shows a small but growing number of highly professional and well-developed archival agencies. It is not unreasonable to expect, as educational budgets rise, as more institutions celebrate centennials, and as archival training programs expand and improve in quality, that there will be a rapid expansion of this important phase of the archival profession.