

Small College Archives: Problems and Solutions

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MUSKINGUM COLLEGE, located in rural New Concord, Ohio, is a typical, small, 4-year, coeducational, liberal arts college. It has a good regional reputation and an affiliation with the United Presbyterian Church.

Muskingum's most important institutional records are extant. Foremost are the bound manuscript minutes of the trustees, dating from the founding of the college in 1837. The records of the 19th-century student literary and debating societies have survived in almost complete sets. The correspondence of the president's office in the 20th century fill many file cabinets. Together these form a rich body of materials.

Through 1962 their survival was accidental. The trustees' records were in a vault in the cashier's office; the registrar had early catalogs. Bulky records were stored at best in the administration building, at worst in the attic of an unheated historic cabin or in a damp basement. Dispersion meant a minimum of care, often none at all.

Muskingum clearly needed a scheme for collecting, organizing, and cataloging the records, a secure room in a fireproof building for processing, storage, and scholarly use, and a person responsible for making the scheme function properly.

Trying to satisfy these needs can be frustrating. Nothing can be done until key faculty and administrators agree that the helter-skelter dispersion of records is fundamentally unsound and that something must be done about it.

Interest can be generated even under the most difficult circumstances. In the Muskingum experience, a centennial celebration stimulated the use of the college's historical records and a search for the college's real past. More recently, the trustees authorized a faculty member to write the institution's history; his research brought home the need for an archive.

Converting concern to action may not be easy. Dozens of practical questions will be raised about archival techniques, policies, and procedures, and no one with the proper expertise will be available. Men in the history department know archives only as readers. The college librarian may give general support, but he probably has no training in

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archive management. Unless the library staff has someone trained in archive and special collections, the search must go elsewhere.

The need for expert advice is obvious. The ideal would be to hire a trained and experienced archivist, but practical considerations effectively preclude this solution. The college's small operations could not justify or attract a full-time archivist. Nor did cooperation with other colleges appear feasible because of geographic position.

As a first step, Muskingum obtained the consultant services of an experienced college archivist. The fact that he was also an alumnus of the college was helpful in analyzing the local situation and in making contacts. During a week in January 1964 he and several faculty "created" the archives. They arranged, classified, and shelved the bound manuscript material in locked cabinets in the trustees' room in the modern college library building. Other materials were acquired and temporarily boxed and shelved. The consultant set up an accession system and constructed a flexible, simplified, and workable classification scheme to cover photographic, printed, and manuscript records of all phases of the college's history. Formal organization emerged.

The consultant also submitted a report to the college president outlining the objectives and needs of the archives. The report, substantially a guide for future development, contained a statement of principles. Three of these are worth giving here in detail because they could apply to all small college archives.

1. *An Official Archivist.* Someone designated by the president and the trustees has to be responsible for the archives. If no one is in charge, nothing will be done. The job should not be added to the work of a full-time faculty member, nor should it be left to a retired professor who volunteers his time. Though the latter can do much good work, he can easily create more problems than he solves.

2. *Adequate Financing.* Money must be budgeted for the archivist's stipend and for necessary equipment. A substantial salary helps guarantee permanency and administrative recognition of the archival program and is also a matter of simple justice to the person who must do the work. Equipment and supplies help the archive to operate in a professional manner. The annual expenses should be a new item on the college budget and should not be taken out of any other category of the college's operating expenses, particularly the library's, because this would only cause hard feelings and arouse antagonisms rather than cooperation.

3. *Publicity.* The faculty should be informed of the existence of the archives and its purpose and plans and should be encouraged to save materials for the collection. To acquire desirable materials, the archive program should be publicized by pictures and stories, particularly in the alumni magazine and local newspapers, and by the alumni director in meetings with alumni.

These principles, together with specific recommendations, provided a plan for the development of the archives. Because the consultant had done the basic organization, a relatively untrained person could easily continue the work. But the college did not follow up on this possibility for several years because of a change in presidents.

A breakthrough came in the fall of 1965 when an instructor in history joined the faculty. He had been a researcher in major university libraries, particularly the manuscript division of the Clements in Ann Arbor, and he had received informal on-the-job training at the Michigan Historical Collections. His qualifications, while not reaching the ideal of the profession, were adequate for the local situation. The next spring he was informally designated college archivist, and he got a grant of \$5,730 from the Presbyterian Church for a 2-year development program, with the provision that the college support the archives thereafter.

In the summer of 1966 the archives began functioning on a formal basis. The general plan was for the archivist and two student assistants to work half time (4 hours a day) for 12 summer weeks, while during the academic year the archivist would be on one-tenth time (4 hours a week) and one student would work 10 hours a week. This scheme reflected an estimate of the volume of work to be done, the availability of students and the time needed to supervise them, and the expected use of the archives.

The students were selected before the summer began. The college's summer school provided a pool of potential workers. Recruiting was easy because the library building was air conditioned and the hourly rate of pay was competitively higher than other campus jobs. The archivist sought students who could learn quickly, make good judgments, do neat work, and perform with a minimum of supervision. Maturity and discretion were essential because of contact with confidential salary records. Financial need and academic records were taken into consideration in deciding between two highly qualified candidates.

Formal staff training was kept to a minimum. The archivist familiarized the students with the basic purpose, organization, and functioning of the archives. Stress was placed on the correct use of the classification guide and shelf lists. Policies governing the sorting of papers were covered in detail. In addition, the students read in the literature on archives, particularly pertinent chapters in Bordin and Warner's *The Modern Manuscript Library* (New York, Scarecrow Press, 1966). The students learned by doing, and the archivist maintained uniformity by inspecting work in progress and work completed.

Acquiring all of the material not collected by the consultant in 1964 was the first major task. The staff brought to the trustees' room loads of 10 to 15 cubic feet, but all was not collected at the outset because the room was used for other purposes, and the archive staff had to be prepared to remove loose materials and boxes on short notice.

Sorting, the second major step in the program, was done on large tables permanently located in the trustees' room. The process was highly satisfying because order began to replace chaos and because a number of supposedly lost historical items were uncovered. The sorting took more time than the archivist had originally estimated. Frequently a

given box contained materials falling into many categories, and individual items had to be cleaned and examined for their contents and retention value.

The correspondence of the president's office was the largest single problem. Only two men had held the office over a 60-year period; both had hastened the college's rate of growth; and both, being Presbyterian ministers, had interests outside academic life. Both had kept good records, but their file cabinets had been emptied periodically into boxes to make room for other records. In the process the original order was destroyed, and in the worst situation loose stacks of correspondence were left on the floor of a storage area. Lots of work was in the offing.

Removing dust and dirt was less of a problem than restoring order. No attempt was made to reconstruct the original alphabetical filing system. To do so would have been a maddening process and little use to a researcher. Thus the staff put the letters into chronological order. By the end of the summer 10 feet of president's papers were neatly arranged and stored in quarter-inch batches in acid-free folders inside $15\frac{1}{2}'' \times 10\frac{1}{2}'' \times 5\frac{1}{4}''$ document boxes.

But the archives did not have all of the papers, a fact revealed by obvious gaps. Inquiry was made, but to no effect. The fall semester began, and efforts turned to sorting personal papers from the president emeritus and files from the academic dean. Only late in the spring semester did 50 linear feet of additional correspondence come to light.

Sorting the new acquisitions became the major project for the summer of 1967. The work was done by two experienced students and took approximately 200 hours, or 4 hours for every foot of material. This statistic gives a crude guideline for the time needed. In the process of removing multicopies, the original mass was reduced to 12 linear feet. Depending upon the condition of the material, the time required could vary. The archivist processed a collection of personal correspondence at a much slower rate because he had to wipe coal dust from envelopes, remove and unfold letters, check for a date and location of the author and recipient, and connect the multipage letters.

Besides taking time, the presidential papers created other problems. A projected work schedule became unrealistic. The staff had to process the presidential papers and to hold other work for later. Space also became critical. The cabinets in the trustees' room could not possibly hold the combined collection, and many classification groups were put in strong $16'' \times 13'' \times 10\frac{1}{2}''$ boxes and deposited in temporary storage until a new wing on the library provides a room for the full collection.

At the end of the summer of 1967 three long-term problems of varying significance still faced the archives. The first was the workload of the archivist. In setting up the 2-year archive development program, he had disregarded the consultant's principle that the archive job should not be added on to full-time duties. During the academic year he found

that managing the archives was more demanding than the time allotted for it. The obvious solution, to be worked out in the future, is for the archivist to have a reduction in his teaching load proportional to the expected work to be done in the archives.

The second problem is that of staff continuity. By chance, neither the archivist nor any of the students continued after the summer of 1967. The archivist recognized the inherent dangers in this situation and gave special training to his successors. There was, nevertheless, an important loss in experience and continuity. For this, no immediate solution was possible.

And last, the objectives of the archives need definition. The immediate purpose is to collect collegiate records and to serve scholars and the institution, as the archives has already done in many ways. To this basic end much work remains, particularly the creation of a systematic and regular records retirement program and an adequate field program for gathering nonarchival but historically important papers of students and faculty. Once this work is done, should the archives expand into other areas? The original collection contained collateral material on the Presbyterian Church, and the archivist in 1967 saved from destruction the files of a defunct local newspaper. Expansion from a small collegiate collection to a center for local and regional social history is a tantalizing challenge. Whether this expansion is feasible or desirable remains an important unsolved problem for Muskingum's small college archives.

Plan to attend:

SAA THIRTY-SECOND ANNUAL MEETING

SEPTEMBER 30-OCTOBER 2, 1968

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*FOR program details please see the inside back cover
of this issue.*