

Administrative Relationships in a Large Manuscript Repository

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THE RECENT past has seen the great expansion of graduate education in this country and the establishment of manuscript collections in most universities to provide source material for dissertation research. Several collections have grown to be rather large operations holding millions of items and employing several people. We have heard of the interests and devoted work that brought the collections to their present state,¹ but we have heard very little about how they should operate on the research-oriented campus or in a research library.

Typically, there is a "head" or "chief" whose interests have shaped the collection and who may be responsible to an advisory committee or a university official. He is assisted by a staff of professionals, semiprofessionals, clerks, students, and hourly employees whose work he directs according to his judgment of the collection's priorities, commitments, and opportunities. The prevailing assumption seems to be that the director is capable of analytical thought and therefore useful, but the staff is task-oriented and therefore ancillary to the basic university purpose. This paper attempts to set forth a hypothetical organizational structure that will define administrative relationships in a large manuscript repository in a way that will provide for the maximum use and development of the professional staff and for their maximum contribution to the university's purpose.

First, I will state my definitions and assumptions. By "administrative relationships," I mean all the structures that govern the creation and implementation of policy. By "large," I mean departments with three or more professional members. By "manuscript repository," I mean any of the units that exist under various names but that primarily contain unpublished material organized and made available for use to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

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¹ See *American Archivist*, vol. 32 (1969) for examples of this kind of information.

I am assuming that most units of this type will exist in large universities—institutions with basic, longstanding commitments to supporting graduate education whose research libraries do not measure their total programs in terms of people sitting in chairs or books circulated. Though it may be possible, I think it extremely unlikely that a large operation will develop in colleges or outside research libraries. The unit will also be different from State agencies that house manuscript materials primarily because State agencies have important museum and historic-site functions and serve the general public.

Essential to my hypothetical structure is the largely untried concept of the university research library as the library college—equal to other university colleges and with a participatory role in the educational and research mission of the university. In such a situation, and regardless of the titles by which they are called, there would exist a “dean of the library” and a “faculty of the library,” governing library affairs and directing its functions in the university. Omitting in this paper, the implications the library college has for the total library and the admittedly fascinating byways of such academic prerogatives as tenure and sabbatical leave, I propose to explore what such a concept would mean for administering manuscript collections.²

If manuscript collections are consciously established and not just stumbled into, they are usually created to provide resource material for training graduate students and attracting committed research scholars. At some point, probably when the creators turn the collections over to others to operate, this educational and research role of the manuscript repository is overwhelmed by the custodial or handmaiden role, which seems to be most pervasive among people now responsible for manuscript collections. Although I do not deny that we have preservation and service functions, I maintain that our most important functions are (1) educating nascent scholars in the significance of primary source material for the investigation of problems and (2) helping investigators study their problems through intellectual mastery of our resources and the intelligent presentation of that information using the techniques and concepts of modern scholarship. I believe that archivists must see relationships between and discriminate among sources and that they must be skilled in the intellectual arts of hypothesis and definition to function professionally. It is not coincidental that these are the very skills en-

² There is extensive literature in library journals on the subject of academic status. One of the better articles is Eldred Smith, “Academic Status for College and University Librarians—Problems and Prospects,” in *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 31, no. 1:7–13 (Jan. 1970).

couraged in graduate students and admired by scholars. Archivists need to recognize the educational dimension of their calling and work to reestablish it.

Having at least posited such a purpose, it is appropriate to turn now to the administrative structures and relationships that will serve it. Externally, the professional staff should have direct access to the dean; that is, the director of libraries. They can then present their program to him without having it routed through devious administrative channels better suited to deflating than to pumping up pressure. They should also present and defend before the college faculty the purpose and program of their department and its relation to the college and university mission so that these could be judged and supported in that context. At this point, it would be essential to remove any advisory boards or directors with anything other than honorary functions.

Internally, the idealized structure would mean the reorganization of the professional staff along the lines of an academic department, including the identification of functional areas in which the staff would operate and contribute according to their abilities and interests. Such areas would include the familiar functions of processing, reference, and administration; should also include development, research, instruction, and publication; and might involve oral, audio, or machine techniques. Staff members would choose or would be chosen for the areas in which they were capable of making their primary contribution, but they would also contribute to other areas as opportunities arose or to assure that the entire responsibility of the department was met.

Instead of positions in a vertical hierarchy as now exist, the administrative structure needed to obtain the maximum utility of personnel would involve establishing ranks that would parallel those in other academic units of the university. Department members would advance through these ranks in terms of their professional contributions and abilities as evaluated by their peers. Length of service could be used to establish evaluation periods; and people not wishing to be judged on academic terms could relocate. This system would avoid attaching the highest title and salary to the administrative function, a practice that is one of the serious weaknesses of the position or job description system of filling vacancies and providing for professional advancement. I also believe that it is one of the stumbling blocks in our search for "status" in the academic community and will say more on this later. The person responsible for administrative duties need not be the senior member of the department nor the one most capable of professional contribution nor, for that matter, the one most able in promoting his own career. He

would, instead, be elected to that position or assigned those duties by the faculty and in line with his interest and ability. A person with professional competence could advance to the highest rank and salary without having to perform duties that were repugnant to him or for which he was unsuited. The obvious parallel is that it is possible to be an excellent teacher and scholar and to receive professorial rank and salary without having been the head of the department.

The ranks instituted in a manuscript collection that would be equal to those in the academic colleges might be "archivist," "associate archivist," "senior assistant archivist," and "assistant archivist." The rank of "instructor" should be avoided since it is more descriptive of a function than a rank and might therefore cause confusion. Titles of "curator," "head," "director," and all assistants attached to them would be eliminated or become functionally descriptive only. It might also be possible to reserve "curator" as an honorary distinction awarded to those who, though not members of the department faculty, were deeply interested or involved in the work of the department (much as the title "lecturer" is now sometimes used). For example, if a person had helped secure a collection, he might be named a curator of it and be one in the best sense; or, if a regular department member was on leave, a temporary curator could be hired for the interim, bringing to the collection specialized knowledge in his subject area.

Regular meetings of the department faculty would be held to determine priorities, to consider what policies should guide individual members in accomplishing their functions, and to evaluate completed work. Supportive and clerical staff would be assigned according to the priorities and needs determined by the faculty. Appointments, promotions, and basic budget decisions would be made in terms of the same priorities. Each member would present the functions for which he was responsible and interpret needs and programs to his colleagues. He could also carry this information to the college faculty and dean for their consideration and action.

Since this is a speculative proposal, it is possible to speculate about the desirable results that should issue from such an administrative organization. First, we should begin to function as professionals in control of our own destiny. Rank and salary would be determined according to professional contribution instead of administrative advancement. Secondly, younger members of the staff would be able to contribute to the decisionmaking activity of the department—to have a piece of the action—and develop in areas of their greatest interest. More of us would become involved in the content and utility of the sources we are responsible for instead of

being concerned only that they do not rot and are in their proper places. Finally, as all the professional staff members would contribute to planning and developing goals and priorities, it would be much more likely that the collection would develop in accordance with the goals of the library and the university, not just in line with the private interest of the person in charge.

These results should, in turn, increase the attractiveness of a career in original source material to young scholars who now find teaching the only road to academia. They should also solve some of the "status-of-librarian" problems that have been occupying so much space in journals, so much time at meetings, and, in some cases, so much sidewalk by pickets who demand more respect for performing routine chores. No one will have status who is hired to fit the job and who is judged by a "boss." The essence of professional activity is that responsibilities fit the man and expand according to his abilities. No professional can ever do the same job in the same way another person did it. Each person must be judged by submitting his work to his peers, not by a foreman's efficiency ratings.

I recognize that there are flaws and weaknesses to this proposal. Probably the most important one is that the model upon which it is based, the academic department, does not function ideally. Second, humans, with all their idiosyncrasies and variety, are involved. A third is that we might try to accomplish the change by merely changing our title and ignoring our performance. Personal discrimination and favoritism may result from the elimination of job descriptions. The list could undoubtedly be extended. I offer the proposal, however, and I leave it to others to develop objections to it or to describe more effective schemes.