

Education for American Archivists

A View from the Trenches

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WE ALL, AS PRACTICING MEMBERS OF THE ARCHIVAL PROFESSION, have an interest in the problems of professional education. This theme of concern persists in the literature,¹ and one might think that everything to be said on the subject has already appeared. What inspires me to contribute to this already voluminous discussion is the opportunity to add two under-represented points of view: that of the purveyor of education, the teaching archivist; and that of the Committee on Education and Professional Development of the Society. In both these instances, I speak only for myself, and no other human being, living or dead, should be held responsible. A decent respect for the opinion of civilized persons dictates that I establish some credentials for my urge to communicate thoughts on this subject. I have been teaching at the graduate level since 1970, and for eleven years I directed a workshop on college and university archives. Since 1972 I have been a member of the Committee on Education and Professional Development, and if I were planning to have a tombstone, I might cause to have engraved upon it the fact that I was the person delegated by the committee to see the guidelines for graduate archival programs through the Council in 1977. My proprietary feelings about the guidelines are limited, however. What I hope to convey is some notion of how they evolved, and what they offer in dealing with our basic problem: what is the most appropriate education now available to American archivists? My primary interest is not in the ideal, but in the possible; my intent is not to lament our failures, but to contemplate our successes, however modest.

Let me define my terms. I propose to discuss education as preparation for the profession: short-term, non-credit; post-appointment, in-service; with pre-appointment, graduate education is my primary concern. For what are we preparing? My definition of an archivist—or manuscripts curator, herein used interchangeably in most connections—is a responsible custodian of original source materials, whose work involves the acquisition,

¹Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *The American Archivist* (hereafter cited as AA) 2 (July 1939); Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," AA 4

appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation, and reference use of such materials of all kinds, and concern with the whole cycle of records creation and disposal. I assume also that it will include the administration or supervision of any or all of those processes.

Ideally, we are educating members of an important and demanding profession, so we also have to be concerned with our students as people. Much is expected of us. To quote Sir Hilary Jenkinson on the archivist, "His aim is to provide, without prejudice or after-thought, for all who honestly wish to know, the means of knowledge. . . . Viewed in these aspects the good archivist is the most selfless devotee of truth the world produces."² To which I must add my own qualification, a modicum of deviousness in a good cause.

The third term in my title is the most difficult to elucidate, beyond the superficial level. What is peculiar to the *American* archivist and thus to the education of American archivists? In the first place I have taken the liberty that citizens of the United States are addicted to: equating the United States with America, and I should immediately withdraw any claim to speak for more than the United States, that area being more than sufficient for my purposes. Even so I start, end, and refer often in the middle to the fact that ours is a small profession, even in a large country. The implications of this fact dominate everything that we do to implement our theories about archival education. In comparison with other programs of professional education, ours is small, indeed minuscule. Important as it is to us, we are never going to be able to command the kind of attention and support that the health professions or even other information professions can expect.

Chronology is inevitably a factor in dealing with American archives; the profession bloomed late in our country, and the nature of our records must be considered in educational planning. The problem of volume of modern records has replaced the problem of deciphering medieval charters. Although records management has asserted its claim to educate its own practitioners, we still have an interest in the life cycle of records, and that preoccupation replaces to some degree the antiquarian aspects of archival education elsewhere. All of this has been said so often that it is a given, but the special character of the profession in this country is not so often considered. My figures are very rough; I bespeak the toleration of dedicated statisticians. Rough though they may be, the percentages are convincing to me. In the 1979 SAA survey³ 1,034 responses by type of employer, rounded off into my three favorite categories, indicate 26 percent in government archives (federal, state, local); 22 percent in manuscript repositories, libraries, and museums; 52 percent in institutional archives of all sorts. In other words, 74 percent of the responding members (which did not include part-time, retirees, or members of religious orders) worked in what we could designate as the private sector, as opposed to government archives.⁴

(April 1941); Karl L. Trever, "The Organization and Status of Archival Training in the United States," AA 11 (April 1948); Allen du Pont Breck, "New Dimensions in the Education of American Archivists," AA 29 (April 1965); Ernst Posner, "Archival Training in the United States," in Kenneth W. Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967); H. G. Jones, "Archival Training in American Universities, 1938-68," AA 31 (April 1968); T. R. Schellenberg, "Archival Training in Library Schools," AA 31 (April 1968); Frank G. Burke, "Education," in Robert L. Clark, Jr., ed., *Archives-Library Relationships* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1976); Frank B. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," AA 40 (January 1977); Hugh A. Taylor, "The Discipline of History and the Education of the American Archivist," AA 40 (October 1977); Lawrence J. McCrank, "Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies in Archival Education," AA 42 (October 1979); Nancy E. Peace and Nancy Fisher Chudacoff, "Archivists and Librarians: A Common Mission, a Common Education," AA 42 (October 1979).

²Sir Hilary Jenkinson, "British Archives and the War," AA 7 (January 1944): 16.

³Mabel E. Deutrich and Ben DeWhitt, "Survey of the Archival Profession—1979," AA 43 (Fall 1980): 532.

⁴By comparison with the figures for the United States, 75 percent of all Canadian archivists are employed in government archives as opposed to archives in the private sector.

We in the United States are educating for a widely diversified market, quite unlike any other in the world. In countries where the profession is still dominated by government archivists, there is commonly a tradition of pre-employment university training, usually involving a carefully calculated limitation of enrollment so that all graduates may be automatically placed. In this country, pre-appointment archival training involves a considerable risk, both for the student and the institution. We educate the best students we can get, in such numbers as we can hope to place in whatever kind of situation may be available, having prepared them to compete in an open market. The implications for curriculum are obvious; we probably will always find a great diversity in emphasis in archival programs. We all also operate under the pressure of competition, because placing students is a matter of honor, and each program tries to recruit and to graduate the best qualified and most attractive students available.

The United States has no such tradition of pre-employment training for government archives. Indeed, the National Archives has ordinarily preferred post-appointment training and has seldom employed graduates of archival training programs. Its contribution to the education of American archivists has been most important, even dominant, in post-appointment training generally, through its sponsorship with American University of the Modern Archives Institute. Since 1945, the National Archives institute has offered training to a substantial portion of the archivists in this country, and from other countries. Moreover, it has served as a model for institutes and workshops that have served the profession well, and will, I think, continue to do so.

Apart from all of these factors influencing archival education, there are some important developments in other areas, which must be considered. One is the financial pressure that has lately afflicted universities, and their discovery of cost accounting that has resulted therefrom. Small programs, no matter how vital to a profession or how dear to their partisans, have to be able to carry themselves financially. Another consequence of academic hard times has been the terrible need of history departments to place graduate students in non-traditional settings, and the consequent joyous recognition of archives along with other positions in "public" history. My alternative title for this paper was "Archival Education: Who Cares?" The answer is: many more people than used to care. In 1966 in Atlanta, H. G. Jones appealed for a half-dozen university courses in archives to supplement the four already in existence. He had no concern about a proliferation of programs, which might result in inferior offerings, because the Society of American Archivists could very quickly set up a system of accreditation.⁵ Fifteen years later, he sounds a little like the sorcerer's apprentice.

There is one other element which must be taken into account in thinking about graduate level archival education in this country—perhaps elsewhere, although I have no way of knowing. That is the fact that most programs are built around a single individual archivist who has been willing to teach, or who found joy in teaching, or who stumbled into it and became addicted. Taking this situation in combination with cost-accounting problems already mentioned poses a real problem in institutionalizing such programs. There are undoubtedly other considerations, but these should be sufficient. Those who yearn to reproduce European archival training should remember that we work in different kinds of repositories with different kinds of records, and that our educational programs have generally very limited institutional support. Graduate archival education in this country is an admirable testimony to the wisdom of Adam Smith; those programs that do not meet the demands of the market do not survive unless a granting agency has somehow been enticed into slanting the odds.

So much for the factors influencing the development of archival education in this country. What kind of person should we be educating? The only absolute certainty I feel

⁵H. G. Jones, "Archival Training in American Universities, 1938–68," p. 153.

in this whole subject is that good archivists are born, not made. We can simplify their lives, and speed up their personal advancement, but without the archival calling the best education we can offer is not going to supply the lack. What are the traits I would hope for? Intelligence, of course; nothing else takes the place of a quick, retentive mind. The proverbial need to bring order out of chaos is important, along with the ability to scan rapidly and accurately, to understand what this document really says. And certainly, I hope for concern for people and ease in dealing with them. Archives and manuscripts represent people's lives and feelings and careers, and they are best taken care of by people who inspire trust. And I would like imagination and creativity—in short, I want the very best students to be archivists; I agree with Karl Trever that what we should first expect of an archival training program is that it “draw into the profession the best possible recruits.”⁶

Having enrolled these paragons, what do they need to learn? Their field will most often, although not necessarily, be history. Most essentially they will need to understand the process of research—for appraisal, for arrangement and description, for reference. They need to be aware of trends in research, although I do not expect even them to be able to predict the future. They need to know how to formulate a problem and how to create search strategies. Most important, they need judgment to evaluate evidence and determine its relevance, to know when a question is answered. Somewhere along the line they need to learn to write precisely and concisely, to describe exactly what this unit of records really is. One of the joys of archival work is that sooner or later you will use almost everything you know; archivists need the broadest possible base of knowledge on which to base appraisal decisions. And in specialized situations, archivists need language skills. All of this I would classify as general cultural background.

In courses devoted to archives, students need to learn archival process and techniques, along with the body of theory on which they are based. They need to learn enough about conservation and non-textual records so that they can take good care of the materials in their custody. Increasingly, even in non-governmental archives, they need to know the legal implications and complications of what they do. In management or administration courses they should acquire understanding of administrative processes, sufficient for records management; and they should learn management techniques such as planning, personnel administration, and the pursuit of funds—in grants or gifts. From information science they will certainly need to learn the potential of computer technology, and the theories of information transfer. I have a strong feeling that they need to know classification theory and indexing, and certainly reprography.

All of this long list involves basically only theory, and the last section of my list of wants deals with the practicum component of the graduate program. Theory is essential, but without the practicum it will not an archivist make. People are not born knowing how to handle documents, any more than they are born knowing how to drill teeth. This is the laboratory component in both situations, and equally vital. I have a very strong feeling that it should be real work, on a professional level, closely supervised. Exercises created to simulate real work, no matter how cleverly they are contrived, do not carry the same conviction, or have the same learning value. This is why the practicum is expensive; it is one-on-one instruction, and it limits the number of participants in any program that does not have extraordinary resources. It is especially important because so few of our students have had a chance to learn about archives before they start their graduate training. Certainly we do not aspire to educate processors, but theoretical knowledge alone provides a very insecure basis for supervision. And only in the practicum can students build confidence in applying those theories to the slippery realities of life.

⁶Karl L. Trever, “The organization and Status of Archival Training in the United States,” p. 160.

The current interest of the SAA in the subject of education stems, as does so much else, from the report of the Committee for the 1970s. The *Guidelines*⁷ approved in 1977 were developed over several years of meetings. It may be instructive to consider the alternatives open to the Committee on Education and Professional Development, in working toward those standards. Basically, there had to be a determination of priorities: pre-appointment or post-appointment training as our major project. The decision that pre-appointment training was more important to us determined the choice of the agency wherein such education was to be predicated; colleges and universities were the only practical choice. No archival agency we knew of offered a basis for evaluating such academic offerings. The question of whether archival education should be available at the graduate level posed no great problem. We were writing standards for a professional education; of course it had to be at the graduate level.

The next decision involved many of the factors I enumerated early on in this paper. Should we try to pursue the European model, with a program dedicated only to archival technique and theory, what I am squeamish about calling archival science? This is not so obvious a decision, and there were at one time strong sentiments expressed in the committee for the year-long archival course. The realities of the situations in which the majority of the members of the committee operated were the dominating factor in the decision that we would set up a standard for a minor in archives for a graduate degree. The issue that generated the most discussion outside the committee was quickly decided: we unanimously agreed to avoid the issue as to whether this graduate degree was to be in history or in library science. The guidelines carefully do not specify any particular kind of graduate degree. In the first set of guidelines, we listed elements of archival theory that must be included in the curriculum. We also set up standards for the practicum, later elaborated into a second set of guidelines. These specifications for "Laboratory Elements," plus what we said about the qualifications of the instructors—five years of responsible experience as an archivist—seem to me the most important parts of those guidelines.

I remember how pleased and excited we were after the meeting, when we finally finished up that document. The committee in its best days functioned in a remarkable fashion; most of the *Guidelines* was actually written during the committee meetings, and you all know how rare it is for a committee to create anything. It happened that Ann Campbell had the same day come back from the last meeting of the Public Documents Commission, which had been a very intensive effort. We all had dinner together, exultant that we had solved the major problems of the profession.

One of the most interesting results of reading for this paper, however, was to discover that most of what we had glorified in originating had been advocated by the patron saints of the profession, over many years. What a joy to find Waldo Gifford Leland in 1909 looking forward to the time "when courses will be given in our universities or in the library school in order to prepare students for archival work."⁸ The conclusions Ernst Posner drew in his paper on European experiences in training archivists are too long to quote,⁹ but they foreshadow many of the decisions of the committee. Most interesting, and probably not so surprising, is how closely we followed the recommendations

⁷Society of American Archivists, "Archives Education Guidelines Approved," *SAA Newsletter*, May 1977, pp. 4–5.

⁸Waldo Gifford Leland, "American Archival Problems," in *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1909* (Washington, D.C.: AHA, 1911), p. 348.

⁹But not too long for a footnote:

1. Training courses are needed, otherwise soundness and uniformity of archival procedure cannot be reached in a given country.
2. Post-appointment training, generally less desirable because the professional fitness of the appointee remains untested, should at least be systematic and planned.

of the Committee for the 1970s. I reread them with the greatest of interest. On education and training, that report recommended "the development of a sequence of introductory and advanced courses, seminars and thesis or dissertation supervision for studies dealing directly with archives administration. Such a program would constitute a solid program of specialization within the existing degree programs for an M.A. or a Ph.D."¹⁰ The report also advocated on-the-job training to provide practical experience that would give meaning and substance to the formal classroom instruction. Most important to me again was the recommendation that training in such programs should be

... firmly rooted in experience. The administration of modern archives is neither an exclusively intellectual discipline, nor a craft, nor a trade, nor yet an art. It shares elements of all of these. It is essential, therefore, that those who offer training to archivists not only have the appropriate academic qualifications, but that they themselves have also the training and experience necessary to give both substance and practical dimensions to their teaching.¹¹

I'm convinced that no one on the committee was aware at that point that we were almost paraphrasing the report of the Committee for the 1970s. Apparently their response to the realities of life was pretty much like our response to those realities. The *Guidelines* may not be revolutionary, but they are realistic and they are based firmly on the traditional wisdom of the profession. They cannot satisfy the demands of the purists; they are essentially a pragmatic solution, utilizing the available resources to the best advantage.

It is instructive to read the publications of the UNESCO program prepared for the 1979 "Meeting of Experts on the Harmonization of Archival Training Programmes" and concerned with the training of archivists. They provide a basis for considering which of our problems are universal and inherent in the process of educating archivists, and which would derive from national tradition and variations in social and economic conditions. My favorite is Michael Cook's evaluation of archival training programs around the world. He described all American training "schemes" as part-time, either for a short time in the year, or as an element in a year-long program. Considering his orientation, I cherish his grudging recognition: "The inherently unsatisfactory nature of the North American model is redeemed by the high reputation and influence of some of its participants, but it is interesting that it has not yet been copied abroad at all, despite the fact that of all the alternative models this is the one which could be set up with the least input of full-

3. An archival school designed for pre-appointment training will hardly flourish unless it has some kind of educational monopoly, or at least conveys upon its graduates a definite advantage with regard to future appointments.

4. Archival schools should not confine their curricula to strictly archival matters, but should combine them with broad training in advanced methods of research in history and related fields.

5. The social sciences should be included in the training program to a larger extent than has been done in most European countries in order that archivists may be better equipped to deal with modern records.

6. Study of and instruction in the history of recordmaking and record administration are as necessary for the archivist of our times as was diplomacy for our predecessors.

7. Archival training should include laboratory work, and, in order to make this possible, the schools should be established in or near an archives building.

8. On the other hand, teaching should be carried on in cooperation with a university in order to promote the maintenance of high scholarly demands.

Ernst Posner, "European Experiences in Training Archivists," in Kenneth W. Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970's," *AA* 35 (April 1972): 210.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 207.

time teaching staff and capital investment.”¹² It appears that American ingenuity and know-how has created an exportable commodity, more useful to developing countries than some other more pretentious schemes, and we should stop apologizing for it.

It is also interesting to note that the report of the Committee for the 1970s envisioned very clearly the problems in setting up a significant system for the accreditation of programs. The experience in working on this problem demonstrates the wisdom of the earlier committee’s judgment. What they could not foresee and we have had to deal with is the proliferation of archival courses offered in a great variety of institutions, and the growing disenchantment of universities and professional societies with the accreditation process. I trust that my visions of the future will be at least as clear as theirs. I foresee the kind of short-term and in-service training that has been a part of our professional practice for so long, persisting well into the future. As long as people come into the profession in mid-career (and this will go on in part-time positions indefinitely), we will have people trained in institutes and workshops. It seems to me that in the area of workshops, continuing education should have priority in the committee’s consideration. This field is changing so quickly that whatever education people bring to the profession will need to be supplemented over the course of a life-long career. Here again, however, I have real qualms about trying to establish standards for workshops. I think that without the pervasive influence of cash from granting agencies, workshops will succeed insofar as they meet the demands of the marketplace and fail when they do not.

The effect on the profession of the emergence of a fair number of graduate programs in archives will be interesting to observe. In the case of the individual graduate, professional advancement should be easier with professional education. I’m certain that the mobility of individuals with graduate education will be greater than those who have been trained in short-term or in-service programs. If we are lucky, a sort of reverse of Gresham’s law will take over and graduate education will be expected, as it is of librarians. In their own self-interest, employers will want to hire staff members who need minimal orientation.

I do not believe that our guidelines for graduate programs are set in stone. I think that there will be a gradual improvement of the programs simply because each individual who is involved in offering education will have ideas about how another course here or a change there could better prepare graduates for work on the job. Eventually, the Committee on Education and Professional Development will, I’m sure, have to survey the situation and upgrade its guidelines simply because good programs will have grown beyond them. The question of whether this kind of education should go on in library schools or history departments will probably solve itself in time. It will become clear that the skills archivists need are broader than either of those disciplines.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the fact that almost no instructors in these programs have full-time, tenure-track appointments. Here again reality is a powerful factor. We simply do not have programs that can support full-time, tenured instructors. I agree that a program where the major instructor appears on campus only to teach a lecture course will never function very well. On the other hand, I am not convinced that the library school model, where gradually instruction has divorced itself from reality, is the very best possible one for our profession to base itself upon. In the health sciences, all of the faculty outside of the laboratory have clinical appointments. The understanding is that their teaching is more useful and more vital because they are at the same time practitioners of their art. I maintain that the same idea applies equally well in our field. And while I do have great concern about institutionalizing programs

¹²Michael Cook, *The Education and Training of Archivists—Status Report of Archival Training Programmes and Assessment of Manpower Needs* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), p. 6.

so they will have a longer life expectancy, I think we'll lose something when we get to that point. It is very special to be able to identify oneself as a graduate of Dolores Renze's program at Denver, or Gerry Ham's at Wisconsin, or Phil Mason's at Wayne State. With all of its problems, there are some special values we will lose as we grow away from this period of the personal influence of archivists of recognized stature and competence who have been willing to exert themselves in behalf of their students and the profession generally.

Frank Evans, who used to grace our committee with his erudition and his profound good sense, is now exercising his talents in advancing archival education on a global scale. I am fortunate to have him for a friend because, among other things, he sends me all of the publications of UNESCO programs concerned with the training of information professionals. One of Frank's offerings I am most grateful for was written in 1978 for UNESCO by A. Neelameghan. This I would not have seen without Frank's good offices, and I value this report highly because it gave me a new motto for myself personally and for the committee. Neelameghan titles one section "Education and Training as Instruments of Policy."¹³ I have retained the capitals to emphasize my appreciation of the phrase. This is an area of which we are all, I think, uneasily aware. After all, we are determining the future of the profession as we educate for the profession. I must say that we sometimes do not live up to Neelameghan's goal that the educational training of professionals be aimed at accelerating innovation. Very often we have been accused of attempting to consolidate the gains of the past rather than looking toward the future.

Our best hope for using education as an instrument of policy is to emphasize most strongly the requirement that directors of archival training programs should be practicing archivists of responsible experience. The obvious reason, of course, is that those people best qualified to teach in the profession are practitioners who know the profession. The essential element of the archival art or craft is judgment; seldom is there only one obvious solution for any problem, and the skillful teacher illuminates the various possibilities and discriminates among them. The "substance and practical dimension" that the Committee for the 70s felt essential for teaching is acquired only by experience, personal or vicarious. Archivists who teach successfully are scholars in the field of archives, just as historians who teach successfully use the research of others to enrich their teaching. There are other considerations that seem to be equally vital. In the first place, as I have said before, everyone grows up knowing librarians. Very few people are fortunate enough to grow up knowing an archivist. The people who come to us for instruction need archivists as role models, as competent, interesting, involved professionals. I have said earlier that we need to be concerned with our students as people. They learn more than theory; they acquire attitudes of dedication, concern, and obligation, if they are taught by professional archivists who work with dedication, concern, and obligation. From this you will have gathered that my other motto is "Archivists should teach archivists." One of the problems inherent in the situation where a historian teaches archivists is that his students will always envision their careers as second choice, as something you do to earn a living because you can't get a real job teaching history.

We are long past the point where we can be thought of as a second-choice profession. We are a first-choice profession, and our education programs should be designed to assure that fact. And if education is to be a successful instrument of policy for this profession, all archivists will have to be actively concerned with it. The people who attend annual meetings could exert decisive influence on the future of the profession if they examine thoughtfully the qualifications of the people they hire. The SAA *Guidelines* pro-

¹³A. Neelameghan, *Guidelines for Formulating Policy on Education, Training and Development of Library and Information Personnel* (Paris: UNESCO, 1978), p. 16.

vide a basis for achieving the “soundness and uniformity of archival procedure” of which Posner spoke, and at the present time we do have the means to make the guidelines effective and decisive. Until we have found a way through the accreditation jungle, you may have to do some inquiring around to make sure that the entry-level staff whom you recruit come out of programs that meet the SAA Guidelines. I assure you it will be worth the trouble; you will have a staff member who makes your life easier, and you will have made a real contribution to the education of American archivists.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: My source for the information in footnote 4, above, that 75 percent of Canadian archivists are employed in government archives, is the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, *Canadian Archives, Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* (Ottawa: The Social Sciences and Human Research Council of Canada, 1980), p. 32.