

In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View

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Abstract: The author proposes that we learn systematically, not impressionistically, who our users are and might be, what kinds of projects they pursue, and, most important, how they approach records. We must begin to think of archives administration as being centered on our clients, not on materials.

Freeman presents a series of misassumptions on which archivists operate and thereby render their work with users far less effective than it might be. The misassumptions are that: as a profession we are oriented toward users; we know who these users are; we understand the nature of research; and we provide adequate help in doing it. She discusses three of these misassumptions at length and examines the changing nature of research, the problems inherent in our finding aids, and the likelihood of a useful connection between how the researcher approaches information and the development of realistic appraisal standards. She then proposes a series of national, regional, and local efforts intended to retrain our thinking about the place of users in archives administration. These include a nationally initiated study of usership, national recognition for exemplary outreach programs, local programs that will elicit information from users, a reexamination of our descriptive and reference practices, and a restructuring of our archival training programs.

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My proposition is, on the surface, a simple one, but one which, if it were accepted, would turn our administrative, descriptive, reference, and training practices upside down. Or, more modestly, it would cause us to arrive at our desks each day with an entirely different set of imperatives from those now before us. That proposition is this: the identity and the research habits of our users—who they are, how they think, how they learn, how they assemble information, to what uses they put it—must become as familiar a part of our thinking as the rules of order and practice (sometimes called principles) that now govern the acquisition, processing, description, and servicing of records. We must begin to learn systematically, not impressionistically as is our present tendency, who our users are; what kinds of projects they pursue, in what time frames, and under what sponsorship; and, most importantly, how they approach records. Put another way, we must begin to think of archives administration as client-centered, not materials-centered.

Is it the case that we do not, as we would like to think, put the user first? And, if we do not, why should we begin to now? First, and most importantly, we should alter our emphasis because we believe as history professionals that, in the analysis of problems, the history of the problem counts. As technologies for reaching current information make that information more accessible, competition between archivists and other suppliers of information will increase. Historical information delivered in bulk, as we now deliver it, will become increasingly less attractive to users who have neither the deep historical commitment nor the time or training to burrow for it. The kindest thing one can now say about our role in the larger world of information access is that we are a quiet, slowly flowing stream. Advanced tech-

nologies may very well make us a backwater, not because our material is irrelevant to current or retrospective questions but rather because of the difficulty users have in reaching the information hidden in the records we hold. The historical element in problem solving will diminish, and that diminution will be a loss to all that we represent.

Second, we should shift our emphasis from materials to users so that we can begin to identify, within some usable context, that mystical universe of documentation about which we have been talking for some time. Within the discretionary areas of acquisition and appraisal, beyond that which appears necessary to document the life of an institution, we should have at least one verifiable frame of reference. We must learn the uses to which our material is put and the methods of the clients who use it.

Finally, we need soon to shift our emphasis so that we do not become caught up in useless technologies or technologies that only make more quickly and expensively the mistakes we have made manually. Our romance with information technologies, evidenced by our increasing use of the phrase information resource managers to describe archivists, has hazards enough. It is already clear that we are well on the way to creating electronic systems that do not supply what users want or, far more important, what they will actually use. Richard Lytle, a central figure in archival information technology studies, puts it well:

Archivists often operate as though they could construct archival access systems without reference to users. Identifying the users and potential users of archives and manuscript collections, and how these users approach the collections, are the most important considerations in constructing a national information system.¹

¹Richard H. Lytle, "A National Information System for Archives and Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 424.

I would add to that a local system, whether computer generated or manual, in any form, whether the still ubiquitous card catalog or the printed inventory.

That we do not put users first is evidenced by a series of misassumptions on which our administrative system is based. These misassumptions, which inevitably skew our thinking about users, also alienate us from current as well as potential users. This alienation makes the archival profession profoundly vulnerable, not only to budget cuts and immediate administrative punishments, but also to the dangers of antiquarianism. When it is pursued by an individual, antiquarianism can be charming. Pursued by a profession, it is potentially destructive.

Our first misassumption is that, because we like reference work, we are, as a profession, oriented to users. In fact, we have what can most kindly be called adversary relationships with genealogists, one of our largest clienteles, and with other avocationists. That one can do research for fun seems not to fall within our categories of acceptable use; thus we distinguish between the serious researcher and all the others. Yet, as we will see, the others comprise a significant, even major, part of our usership. Similarly, we tend to be cool to the user who is not professionally trained to do research. This category probably includes most of our clientele. We favor the researcher who understands, or at least does not question, our organization of the records; who is willing to do labor-intensive work to uncover the nugget he seeks; whose experience is such

that he is able to use our categories of description; and who can spend time browsing, a research activity that is rapidly becoming a luxury for many. It matters very little to this argument whether the researcher is engaged in either academic or applied research, as William Joyce has distinguished between them, though that distinction may have great bearing on how we appraise, organize, and describe records in the future.² If the researcher speaks our language, we favor him; if he does not, we tend to be less sympathetic. In neither instance do we appear to make a serious effort to discover how the user arrived at our material, either in the physical or intellectual sense; why he asks his questions as he does; or how he will integrate the information he obtains.

Second is our misassumption that we know who our users are. We want to think that they are historians, or at least scholars, though we know that within at least our public institutions the largest group of users, undifferentiated in the statistics we irregularly keep, are avocationists. Otherwise, custodians of public institutions assume that they work largely with bureaucrats like themselves, or with professionals—lawyers, social planners, writers, developers, and the like—whose time is either limited at the outset or, increasingly, monitored by the funding agencies that pay for their projects. It is time to investigate in detail the suspicion, held by many of us now, that the bulk of our clientele in public archives, apart from avocationists, are professional people with minimal histor-

²William L. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984), pp. 124. Joyce distinguishes between academic and applied research. The first is likely to be "theoretical in nature and proceeds in the manner of an open-ended inquiry." Applied research, on the other hand, is characterized by "a very specific need and a deadline." Trudy Huskamp Peterson makes a similar distinction in conversation, referring to "researchers of the interpretation" and "researchers of the fact." The distinction is less important to this discussion than the fact that both interpretative and factual researchers who are trained historians are likely to approach information differently from those who are not historians.

ical training who are interested in information about the past, i.e., retrospective information, but not in history as we understand it. It is even more important to evaluate the clientele of manuscript collections, who are even more frequently assumed to be historians or other scholars but who, in fact, may often be amateur researchers or researchers seeking information for other professional purposes. In neither case, however, will these users pursue or integrate the information in records as would trained historians. If this suspicion proves to be true, its implications are considerable for at least our descriptive and reference services. It also has broad implications for archival training programs and outreach services.

Stemming from this misassumption are two others: first, that we understand how research is done, and, second, that we provide adequate help in doing it. The last is reflected in litanies touching on the need for the client to do the secondary reading and our obligation to do only reference, not the client's research. Both, in my view, evade collegial and didactic responsibilities toward the client.

Of these four misassumptions—that we are oriented to users, that we know who uses our material, that we understand the research process, and that we provide practical, even sufficient, help in doing it—three are worth discussing at length. At the very least we must consider who our users are and what we have yet to learn about them.

Our information on who our users are is spotty because not much statistical information appears to be kept, nor is it disseminated when it is compiled. That is in itself stunning given our frequent references to the historians/scholars

who we say are our users. We can, however, gather some information by inference. Margaret Steig surveyed 767 historians to discover their attitudes toward, and use of, periodicals and other library resources, including manuscripts, microcopies, maps, newspapers, theses, dissertations, and films and other audiovisual documentation. One half of those queried responded. Predictably, books and periodicals were the most frequently used items, with manuscripts running third. Other formats that we also consider to be primary sources, however, including films, maps, photographs, microfilms, and computer printouts, ranked anywhere from seventh to thirteenth place. Even more interesting, those formats seen by historians as the least convenient to use were the least used. Books and periodicals, which they viewed as the most convenient formats, were also the most frequently used.³ Steig also drew some interesting conclusions about the research habits of historians. They do not have a "well-developed invisible college as do scientists, but depend primarily upon printed sources of information."⁴

Their research is essentially unsystematic but, more important, uncritical. They rely as much upon book reviews as upon the books themselves. They fail to use the abstracts and indexes provided them by both librarians and archivists and tend to rely upon such bibliographic sources as the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, seldom viewed as a scholarly resource. In one telling comment, Steig noted that

A number of historians went out of their way to say that they never used indexes or abstracts; many considered them irrelevant. Only one individual said that his nonuse was

³Margaret F. Steig, "The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981): 551.

⁴*Ibid.*, 553.

probably because he never learned how.⁵

Four years earlier, however, Michael Stevens had come to similar conclusions. Commenting on the research habits of 123 American historians whom he had polled, one half of whom responded, Stevens found that historians most frequently use formal methods of learning the whereabouts of documents and references found in secondary sources. Thus the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* and Philip M. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*, precursor of the present National Historical Publications and Records Commission *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories*, fall at the bottom of six suggested ways of finding information. This casts severe doubt on the utility of our national finding aids. Overwhelmingly, Stevens' respondents reported that other historians, either in their writing or by word of mouth, were the principal sources of information.⁶

That creating a good guide is not adequate inducement to heavier scholarly use is demonstrated by Roy Turnbaugh of the Illinois State Archives. Hoping to alter their heavy use by genealogists and bureaucrats to include more use by scholars, the Illinois State Archives produced a *Descriptive Inventory* in 1978. The publication was well received among professionals and was publicized widely. Illinois public, university, and college libraries purchased 600 copies. Did the rush to scholarly use begin? It did not, as Turnbaugh noted:

The hope was that shortly after publication, the archives would acquire a growing coterie of scholarly

patrons. These expectations have not been realized. The state archives had some scholarly users before the guide appeared and continues to have about the same since it was published.⁷

More provocative is Turnbaugh's next comment. Noting that since 1933, about 30,000 doctorates in history have been awarded in the United States, he says:

Even if the Illinois State Archives received one reference request from each one of these historians, living and dead, in the course of a single year, it would still remain heavily dependent on . . . bureaucrats and genealogists to justify its continued existence.⁸

Based on the impressionistic experience of other archivists in public institutions, we would not be surprised to find that genealogists and bureaucrats appear to be the principal users of archives, with social scientists, publicists, filmmakers, lawyers, public policy planners, and other professionals probably following close behind. Surprising in their implications are the results of an informal survey taken by Arthur Breton, curator of manuscripts for the Archives of American Art. This repository is housed in the Smithsonian Institution and includes personal papers of American artists and craftsmen. Surveying 416 users, Breton found that only 13 percent were academic faculty, while 43 percent were students, including undergraduates. These two groups of academics comprised 56 percent of the clientele. Surprisingly, however, 31 percent—nearly one third—of the archives' users were private individuals, i.e., clients researching their own art holdings, doing genealogy, or simply looking. When

⁵Ibid., 554.

⁶Michael E. Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," *Georgia Archive* 5 (Winter 1977): 68.

⁷Roy Turnbaugh, "Living with a Guide," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 451.

⁸Ibid.

Breton broke down the purposes of research into categories defined by the clients themselves, he found that half of the work being done was toward a book, article, coursework, or dissertation. Even in this esoteric collection, whose resources might have been thought to be the special province of scholars, 17 percent of the use of the material was toward such professional activities as filmmaking, development of catalogs, or exhibition production. Even more surprising, 27 percent of the use was personal, i.e., aimed at seeking information about personal art holdings, in pursuit of genealogy, or done out of curiosity.⁹ In addition, using information contained in 190 interlibrary loan forms, Breton found that nearly 30 percent of the archives' users were in disciplines other than art history, art, or fine arts. These included not only the humane studies but sociology, political science, medicine, kinesiology, architecture, film, education, and museology.¹⁰

From this scattered information, a number of conclusions seem inevitable. One is that historians are neither our principal nor our most significant users. Even with the little information we now have, we know this intuitively; it is the prejudice we find hard to let go. It follows from this that, if historians are not our principal users, we need not produce the elaborate bibliographic tools that they ask of us, particularly since the evidence is clear that they do not use such tools when they are produced. It is equally clear that, in spite of the difficulties inherent in working with records, we have a varied and astonishing number of users—some academic,

others professional, still others simply avocational—who hold the promise of still more and varied categories of users. We owe them simplicity, elegance, and welcome.

In contrasting academic librarians with urban public librarians and special librarians, Margaret Steig made a comment which has meaning for archivists.

What urban public and special librarians have in common is aggressiveness. Neither waits for the patron to come to the library. . . . They place a greater emphasis on finding out what the patron thinks he needs (and providing it) *regardless of library traditions* than do academic librarians. Both attach great importance to providing the information in the format most convenient to the user.¹¹

It follows from Steig that archivists, whom I would equate with academic librarians, have a great deal to learn from urban public and special librarians. It is very likely, for example, that for all users, convenience of use is the issue, a fact on which we must reflect before we undertake one more traditional or computer generated index, inventory, or guide. The model of Steig's study itself is perhaps most immediate. She seeks to know with accuracy and intentionality not only what users claim to want but what they actually do, how they think, and, most important, who they are. (In research as in life, want and need are separable categories.) Seeking this information of all users of archives should be first on our research agenda, not only as a profession but as archivists within our own institutions. Our failure to gather this information and apply it

⁹Arthur Breton compiled these figures from user statistics between January 1980 and November 1982. They are available from him at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.

¹⁰Breton's conclusions are based on figures compiled in 1979-80 and are also available at the address given in note 9.

¹¹Steig, "The Information of [sic] Needs of Historians," p. 559. Italics added for emphasis.

gives credence to our prejudices, which, in turn, govern our practice. The National Archives, for example, has not done a study of its users since 1976. That study was informally done, and the information in it was taken entirely from registration information whose categories were defined by archivists and from interviews with archivists, not users. In one collection, well known to many of us, 30 percent of the users were characterized as "other." When no precedent exists for characterizing users more specifically, there is little wonder that one out of three users is relegated to such a meaningless category.

The fact is that we have never examined systematically who our users are, either on a national, regional, or institutional basis. Those unexamined users are undoubtedly changing. There is an unstudied "other" to whom we must address ourselves lest they forget what we know, that history has a method and that history counts. We can learn what questions to ask from other professional communities who have studied their clienteles and from the archival community, in which a few studies have been made. As a member of the Joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology, Helen Slotkin, archivist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is interviewing users and prospective users of archives. She finds that they comprise a wider and more diverse group than we have ever supposed. Historians of science, it is worth noting, make up only a small portion of the users.

Whether we provide adequate help in doing research, either in print or during the reference process, and whether we understand the nature of research are open questions. They are certainly

related questions. Mary Jo Pugh noted some of the assumptions that archivists make about the reference process, with particular reference to subject retrieval. Among them, she says, is that of continuous interaction between user and archivist, which, while requiring the user to have knowledge extrinsic to the records, nevertheless renders him dependent on the archivist. Another is that the user wants "high recall and does not care if he gets low precision."¹² In other words, according to the archivist, time and efficiency are not objects in the stately realms of research. Noting that standard reference practice is inadequate to user needs, that arrangement and description procedures in archival repositories fail to focus on user needs, and that archivists have not sought to analyze "the elements which comprise a successful reference interview and have not studied the process of question negotiation in the archival setting," Pugh pleads for more discriminating, intellectually involving description.

Analysis of both provenance and content can and should be part of our daily work. Archivists tend to be too passive and bureaucratic when writing inventories and registers. Inventories, which should be the major intellectual accomplishment of our profession, are too often merely lists of container and file headings. ... Preparing a sensitive, perceptive, provocative essay on the strengths and weaknesses of records for research use is difficult. It requires historical knowledge, imagination, and the ability to write clear prose. It is also difficult to assess records for current research interests and to anticipate other uses of the records. But if we are unable to assess and analyze the records, why are we saving them?¹³

¹²Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 38.

¹³*Ibid.*, 42.

To Pugh's plea for intellectual rigor in description, add imagination, appropriateness of format, and convenience of use. What we are pleased to call finding aids are at best intramural communications written by one archivist to be read by another, not by a user. Writing in the language of administration, authors of these documents address neither the expressed needs of the user nor the historical context of the records themselves. Authors of most finding aids assume an exquisite knowledge of chronology and context that the specialized nature of most research and the want of historical training of many users must belie, and they assume unlimited leisure on the user's part. Most finding aids are very difficult to locate.¹⁴ When I was an undergraduate, it was a popular trick to put a penny under the bed to see if the cleaning staff would find it. Later, realizing the limitations of our vision, we raised the ante to a silver dollar. Even so, the prize lay under the bed from one semester to the next. The principle is simple: if it is not worth sweeping under the bed at the outset, one will not bother to do it. If our procedures do not encourage sweeping, how do we expect the silver dollars to be found?

The larger question of how we know what we know must be approached warily, particularly when one senses that the question is related to our assumptions about the acquisition and appraisal of records. Archivists want to think that, in documenting the life of an institution, they lend the institution a kind of paper immortality: Cerberus, guarding the metaphysical gates of the individual, the

family, corporation, or organization. Two problems arise here. The first is that we may be confusing the wider and wider accumulation of records with research vitality, just as some mistakenly assume that a great number of articles published equals a healthy, critical profession. The second is one of epistemology. Records are not artifactual in the sense that they have the shape or physical properties of objects. They are not houses built of paper nor the jewels of the Medici, valuable in themselves as objects whether or not they are used. Records are inert until they are acted upon by the human mind. It can be argued that, like George Berkeley's tree falling in the forest, records do not exist until they are used.

Similarly, institutions do not exist, once they have disappeared in time, until they are recreated by the human mind. Research has characteristics that render incorrect our single-focused view that we, as archivists, are solely responsible for the lives of institutions and individuals as those lives appear in the records created around them, as if that recreation were somehow a process inherent only in the records. Among these characteristics, we find that the researcher, whatever his training, is able to read only one document at a time and that, after each reading, the question may change. We find that in research, each step decides the next, and that no two inquiries, however similarly worded, are the same. If we also allow that our usership is, both in reality and potentially, very much broader than the small community of history profes-

¹⁴On the basis of 441 microfilm requests for Archives of American Art materials, Arthur Breton has concluded that 37 percent of the respondents learned about the institution's holdings from reading a checklist, compiled by the curator of manuscripts, which had been widely distributed and was for sale for \$6.00. Many respondents had bought a copy and keep it permanently on their desks, a testimony to the principle of convenience. The remainder of the respondents had learned about the archives' material from five other sources, ranging from conversations with colleagues to a published directory of sources. None mentioned any of the major national finding aids even though entries for the Archives of American Art have appeared in NUCMC since 1959.

sionals we now think of as our clientele, it follows that questions about how and by whom records are used take on considerably greater magnitude than we have heretofore given them. At the very least, the so-called universe of documentation is peopled; and, until we know the learning and thinking characteristics of those people, we acquire and appraise in a dangerous vacuum. Certainly a look at how and why users approach records will give us new criteria for appraising records. Interestingly, the Slotkin study is intended to establish appraisal criteria. Presumably Slotkin will develop recommendations for the appraisal of records in the sciences different from those we now have, since she is discovering users different from those we supposed we had. It is also worth noting that the task force recently created in the National Archives to examine appraisal and disposition has included in its study plan an extensive list of questions relating to use and users.

How, then, do we turn our own psychological and professional tables? How do we make users, rather than the records or their manipulation, the focus of our daily activity? We do so by developing at the national, regional, and institutional level an agenda that affects our professional meetings, our training programs, and our concepts of archives administration. Most important, this agenda will affect the choice we make as we walk into the office in the morning to make papers or people our first priority.

First, we must make a statistically sound examination of who we are serving, who our potential users are, and how they approach the material they use. The Society of American Archivists, for example, should seek funding to work with one or more regional organizations to study the information needs and methods of the users of

representative institutions, compiling not only statistical but also anecdotal information about them, the material they use and to what purpose, how they approach the material, and how these approaches compare among disciplines. Models exist in the library profession and, as we have seen, in our own. Seeking information not only about users but directly from them, using their categories to describe their work, noting the product of their research as well as its subject matter, and acquiring narrative as well as numerical information should become part of the daily work plan of every institution. This is unlikely to happen until the concept has been vested at a high level. Such a survey is also possible on a regional level under the aegis of a regional organization.

In our local repositories, we can begin seeking information rather than only dispensing it. In addition to formal statistical surveys of usership, let me suggest one or two other means of learning about our clientele. The entrance interview, for example, is standard procedure and allows us to give information. Not so typical is the exit interview, in which the archivist seeks information about the client's approaches to the records, his success or failure with these approaches, and the ways in which his questions have changed. Conducted carefully, with consistently asked questions, accurately recorded answers, and meticulous attention to the client's language and content, these interviews can be invaluable in building a body of information we now lack.

Another variation on an old theme is the work group or conference, in which the archivist seeks information from the client rather than delivering it. Such exchanges need not be entirely in one direction, but the focus of the archivist should change from that of preceptor to student. Inevitably, in the best adult

learning exchanges, all participants will both teach and learn. In such a work group, the archivist gathers a small group of users who may represent either a present or a potential community of users, then seeks specific information from them. How, for example, did they hear about the repository? What reference aids have they used? What are the research trends in their field? What are the time or budgetary constraints upon them? Who are their leaders and change agents? If, for example, these clients are faculty members, the archivist might ask what curricular or enrollment changes they foresee or what changes seem likely in research, employment, or other trends in their field. I have never run such a meeting; but I know, as a fact, that people like to talk about their work to someone clearly interested in it.

Once we accept the concept that we must reach out to clients for information about their work and find them where they are, ideas for doing so emerge readily. Just as doctors are once again making house calls and lawyers are advertising, archivists must move beyond the limited circles of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* and national or regional historical journals to make their materials known. If the archivist's clientele occasionally includes a staff member for a local politician, for example, he would do well to be in touch with the offices of other political figures both before and after campaigns. If the city planning commission is preparing a study, the city archivist can remind its members that he is there to help them review where they have come from, with a view to their knowing where they are going. If a department in the local university is planning a curriculum review, the university archivist with appropriate records might well consider offering not only material for research papers—this

is easily ignored—but the ingredients for a curriculum base. The principle is a simple one: uncover a need and then fill it conveniently.

In seeking to learn about the intellectual and working needs of our clientele and then filling those needs, we can profit from asking ourselves the questions that archivists in public programs regularly ask. These questions would illuminate all our administrative practices, not only those that result in conferences, workshops, exhibitions, or educational materials. These questions include: What is the mandate of my institution? How are the publics we serve comprised? Of these publics, on which should we focus our resources and for what reasons? Who are the members of that community, and what, specifically, do they need from an archives? How can we ascertain that need? Does that need take the form of research help, publication, or program assistance? From which of these kinds of assistance can we get a maximum return on our archival resources? Do we define maximum in terms of numbers, short-term effect, or dollars? How can we best deliver these programs? How do we evaluate our efforts?

Our second requirement is to find ways to turn information out more quickly, imaginatively, and appropriately. Mary Jo Pugh's observations are useful here, suggesting as they do that we still expect users to spend enormous amounts of time panning for gold when their work schedule, in fact, requires a quick strike. We force them to work on our terms, not theirs. Let me offer a few observations about reference service and the creation of finding aids. First, not all users need traditional one archivist to one researcher reference service, which is the most expensive kind we offer. All users need equal access; they do not all need equal time or the same method of

access. Second, it is possible to build a certain amount of cost return into some kinds of reference service. Third, there is more than one way to write a finding aid; every one should be literate, understandable to the clients, available easily outside the archives (preferably at low cost), and aimed at freeing the user from dependence upon the archivist. In short, finding aids should focus on the convenience of the user, not the archivist.

If, for example, we are dealing with a clientele, such as genealogists, family historians, legal researchers, or claimants, that seeks name identification, let that clientele pay to support the development of appropriate data bases by private firms. Such support is certainly available in these communities, and industry has the technology. Or, as David Bearman suggests, let a commercial firm answer such questions for a price levied upon the user.¹⁵ The Dutch genealogical society works with the national archives of The Netherlands as a self-supporting company providing just such a service for profit. If our clients are commercial publishers, let them build the cost of specialized reference service into the cost of publications. Most publishers already hire researchers who are not as efficient as archivists. We might, for example, hire archivists with an education background to search records for educational publishers or archivists with art backgrounds to provide illustrations. The reference needs of the educational community constitute another separable category that is a natural milieu for us. Production of educational material for growth industries in education—community college courses or occupational training programs, for example—is only one possibility. If, on the

other hand, we deal with a clientele who would willingly use records if somehow our reference points resembled theirs, perhaps we should modify our finding aids. To do so, we may have to learn new languages. Is it not possible, for example, to write checklists aimed at users in specific disciplines from traditional finding aids or to provide *précis* of collections which point out their uses beyond the traditional historical ones? Staff representatives of other disciplines might well provide this information to their members as a service with help and cooperation from us. We might also begin to write descriptions of research procedures that will aid the large number of users with little or no training in, or complex knowledge of, history or with little experience in searching records. At the very simplest level, we can show drafts of new finding aids to the people we expect to use them and solicit their comments as editorial advice.

Regional and national possibilities suggest themselves. The Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference has recently established a prize for the year's best finding aid. Criteria considered include readability, design, breadth of historical context, and availability.¹⁶ The Society of American Archivists might consider establishing an award for the institution that is particularly active and innovative each year in reaching new audiences, in accommodating the needs of established audiences, or in finding imaginative and administratively sound ways to place the needs of users first on its list of institutional priorities.

Without a doubt, viewing our work as centered on our clients rather than on records would change significantly the

¹⁵David Bearman, "The National Archives and Records Service: Policy Choices for the Next Five Years." Paper delivered at the National Archives Assembly, Washington, D.C., 15 December 1981.

¹⁶Criteria for this award are available from Jacqueline Goggin, Library of Congress, who chairs this committee.

way we appraise records, describe and publicize them, and provide reference service; but in no area would our revised view be so evident as in the training of archivists. At present, training is focused on the management of records, not on the needs of users. Archival trainees learn to appraise records with little serious consideration of their use; to organize and describe records according to traditional rules which have little or no bearing on the ways in which these records are actually used or by whom; and to provide reference service to a public perceived monolithically. Toward the end of the typical training course, the trainee hears a lecture on public programs, in which a smorgasbord of conferences, exhibits, workshops, and publications is described. The archivist can choose which ones to produce, but nowhere is he given any indication of their apparent relation, either to each other or to other administrative functions in the archives. What would happen to this potpourri if we were to change our focus from the administration of the records to the requirements of users? What might such a training course include?

High in the syllabus would be a series of sessions designed to teach the trainee a range of techniques for surveying use and users: how to discover who one's clientele is and can be; how to seek information; how to structure an administrative program with users in mind. Second, such a course would consider the problem of records processing in terms of alternatives, keeping in mind, for example, that original order is not always useful to users. Archivists would become accustomed to processing at different levels within a collection and among collections as well as to making processing decisions based on information about use rather than on questions of uniformity. Both the assumptions and the implications of provenance should be ex-

amined at every turn. Appraisal standards and techniques would be examined and reordered in the light of information from a wide variety of users, including not only scholars, but professionals and avocationists. Sessions on the reference process would be based on observation and analysis of successful and unsuccessful reference interviews and would emphasize techniques for gathering and integrating information, asking and hearing questions, and developing sound research strategies with the client. The trainee would move through a series of increasingly sophisticated reference negotiations. Both trainees and clients would participate in reviews of the process. Description of records would focus first on the writing of literate, historically enlightening finding aids and then on the adaptation of this information to a variety of forms geared to various research and educational uses. Ideally, planning for these descriptions would be done by both trainee and user. At the least, any descriptions written by a trainee would be reviewed by a user, then revised appropriately. Such an exercise could not help but be a fascinating project in group interaction, learning, and application. Public programs, often omitted entirely from our training programs, would be integral to a revised course and would focus on the administration of outreach and educational events. The trainee would be required to weigh resources and choices in the light of community needs, staff resources, and institutional objectives. Negotiation and planning with the community as well as with archives staff would be essential in this kind of instruction. Sessions on planning, budget, and general administration would include consideration of ways to alter traditional priorities in the archives so as to create the time and resources necessary to learn about

the users; to ascertain the cost of greater and different service to users, particularly in archives whose holdings are increasingly machine-generated, and where, therefore, the cost of service increases; and to analyze staff talents and resources in terms of a changed administrative focus. At no time in this training process would the archivist be isolated from the user as is uniformly the case in current archival training programs. Staff for such a course would include not only archivists but users, social scientists, and educators, the last of whom would teach skills for information gathering and negotiation. I recommend that the Society of American Archivists join with interested educators in the profession to seek funding soon to plan and present an experimental course of this kind.

As an alternative and more immediate start, the Society might organize a series of workshops on reference and the administration of public programs based on the three excellent manuals it has published on these subjects. The principal objectives of these workshops would be to provide trainees with techniques for ascertaining what users need and supplying those needs. The Society has thus far been reluctant to offer these specialized workshops, on the ground that archivists have not asked for them. Given archivists' attitudes toward users and their present priorities, it is unlikely that we will clamor for such training until Society leadership understands the need for it and makes it available. Like a

close examination of usership, training that changes our attitudes and priorities must be vested at a high level.

I am aware that the recommendations I make would change long-established relationships, control, and patterns of authority, not only between archivist and user but also among archivists. In short, they are unsettling; but they are worth beginning at home and supporting nationally. It is helpful to remind ourselves that in this nation a sense of the value of history does exist, often only for its personal and recreational uses but also for its use in shaping our sense of what constitutes the common good. That sense often lapses into nostalgia and can be dangerous, particularly when it is used to shape public policy. As the sources of history stir us, they stir the public, whether professional or avocational. Not only are archivists the custodians of these sources, but in a curious way we have become custodians of the process of history itself. That process is irresistible; and communicating and sharing it should be all the more possible in a society that believes that history has public value. It is possible for us to transmit daily our vision of the past and how that past is known: its rigor, its unrelentingness, its usability. To do so, we must know to whom we are delivering that vision and how it will be perceived. It is none too soon to begin actively reflecting upon how to do that and then placing our resources where those reflections lead us.