

# Planning for the Archival Profession

F. GERALD HAM

## Introduction

ONE MARK OF A WELL-ORGANIZED PROFESSION is its sense of direction, its consensus as to what its goals are and how they might be attained. In this area, however, the introspective and isolationist proclivities of our custodial past have mitigated against developing agreement on anything approaching a strategic vision of where we as archivists should be heading. As I review our attempts to arrive at shared goals and purpose, I am reminded of the dialogue in *Alice in Wonderland* between Alice and the Cheshire Cat. Alice asks: "Would you please tell me which way I ought to go from here?" The cat replies: "That depends a good deal on where you want to go." Alice then says: "I don't much care where." The cat responds: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

It has always mattered which way we go, but never so much as at present; it matters now for several reasons, for reasons that may threaten our existence

as archivists. Many of these threats are external and come from the transformation of America from an industrial to an information society, and in particular from the rapid changes in the way we create, transmit, and store information.

One threat is information pollution. Archivists no longer deal with a scarcity of information, but rather are faced with an inundation of data, and our survival of this scourge depends upon our ability to bring order out of chaos and to give value to otherwise useless information. Another threat is posed by the collapsing barriers and dissolving boundaries between archivists and other information handlers whose access to and use of resources is often better than ours. As the distinction between information formats and the differences between published and unpublished information blur beyond recognition and become irrelevant, we see these information handlers gradually filling roles once within the province of archivists. Unfortunately, much of this emerging archival

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*F. Gerald Ham is state archivist of Wisconsin and chair of SAA's Goals and Priorities Task Force. This article, which was first presented as a plenary address at SAA's 48th annual meeting in Washington, comments on the initial discussion draft of the Task Force's report, "Planning for the Archival Profession." Copies of the report are available from SAA headquarters.*

obsolescence is the result of our failure to recognize where we fit in the information handling enterprise.

Not all threats are external, however. Much of the poverty of archival programs described by David Bearman and documented by the State Assessment Reports is the result of our own actions and inactions; it leaves us unable to meet these external threats. Lack of standards for education and jobs and lack of programs for cooperation and resource sharing have the same effect. But our vulnerability comes, above all, from the lack of a clear and shared vision of what we need to do to meet these challenges. The Task Force on Goals and Priorities aspires to provide the means to meet these challenges.

## Elements of a Planning Process

### *A Plan for Planning*

The task force considers the report proper to be more a plan for planning than a plan itself. This plan for planning has two major components. The first, the planning hierarchy, gives us an intellectual framework for planning and decision-making while the second, the proposed Committee on Archival Planning and Development (CAPD), provides a means for institutionalizing planning as a constant and ongoing process. The first component, with its various elements in the planning hierarchy, may seem dense and impenetrable. Indeed, casually read, the report may appear at best to be little more than a wish list of everything an archivist would like to do. The task force has a somewhat different vision of the document. For one thing, we think the report can lead us to a universe of discourse by providing us with a vocabulary in which we can discuss priorities and establish courses of action. Within this planning framework, we have not only defined our

goals and objectives but also have developed strategies and have identified specific courses of action which the strategies tie together in an overall plan of action. The scope of the hierarchy is global, not parochial and particular; it seeks to address the needs of Ann Morgan Campbell's archivists at Cupcake Corners as well as those in Albany, Washington, or Ottawa. This is accomplished, not by telling archivists what they need to do and how to do it individually, but rather by outlining what the archival profession working together needs to do.

While the activities might well constitute an agenda for the next few years, we do not view the hierarchy of planning elements as a formal plan. For example, we do not deal with the instrumentalities, resources, or time frames for carrying out activities. Instead, the hierarchy is a foundation for the archival planning process.

### *Institutionalizing Planning: The Committee on Archival Planning and Development*

The inability of the archival profession to translate statements of objectives and needs into programs of action has doomed many of our previous planning efforts. This inability is in large part the result of viewing such statements as static ends rather than as part of the action itself—as something changing and dynamic. Consequently, we have lacked both an instrument for carrying out planning and an understanding of how our statements fit into an evolving process. Indeed, the 1977 Priorities Conference report is a classic example of a statement that did not pay off precisely because we lacked a mechanism for organizing and advancing our planning and because we took the report as an end in itself.

One of the charges to the GAP Task Force was to consider the utility of a

constant process and the methods by which such a process might be implemented and sustained. GAP's response to this charge is the Committee on Archival Planning and Development. The objective of this body, in addition to finding a more euphonious acronym for itself, is three-fold: (1) to refine, update, and promulgate statements of mission, goals, objectives, and strategies, and to recommend priority activities; (2) to advance activities recommended through this process; and (3) to promote planning by archival organizations and associations.

We envision a committee which, representing the entire archival community, will build on this report. CAPD should give us an instrumentality, not only to make planning a constant process, but also to assist in implementing a program of action—to assist but not take over. Program development must remain the responsibility of the associations, networks, repositories, and agencies that make up an archival community.

We believe this committee can lead to fundamental changes within the profession. As one member of the task force has pointed out, the committee could, for the first time, give the profession's mission and goals an interdisciplinary national focus. It also could equip the national associations like the Society of American Archivists and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators to move beyond planning for traditional organizational needs and to plan for the preservation of the historical record in a larger context that cuts across regional and disciplinary boundaries. Many task force members consider this section, with its underlying emphasis on our need continually to rethink and plan, to be the most important and critical part of the report.

### *Beginning to Make a Plan: Short-Term Initiative*

The section on short-term initiatives—where we begin to make some plans—is, in many ways, a trial balloon, and some people already are using it as a target. This part of the report is designed to illustrate the importance of the planning hierarchy in the process of determining a particular course of action and to show how the planning process can have some relatively immediate and concrete impact. The truth is that the task force felt that, in order to take the onus off planning as a visionary exercise, it was important to demonstrate that the process can produce concrete, successful efforts in the very short term. One thing that surprised us was the rapidity and ease with which we could select and agree upon specific courses of action once we have developed the hierarchy. The process seemed to work.

In selecting short-term initiatives, our emphasis was on activities which were timely because of the needs they address or because they represent a beginning toward larger and more generalized accomplishments. While these initial choices may indeed reflect a narrow range of broader institutional concerns, we are convinced that, with additional effort, still larger and more long-range programs can result from the same process. At this stage, then, we begin to make a plan. We not only select and elaborate on the initiatives which need to be taken, but we also address the question of who will carry out the action, who will be the actors. Our list of actors is not a certified or definitive list but rather is designed to stimulate thinking about who might undertake activities. The list contains not only the typical roster of our profession and institutions, but it also includes those who have not traditionally viewed themselves as agents

of archival problem solving.

A review of this trial process reveals a need to develop more of the apparatus of planning. We need to know not only who the actors will be but also what resources we have for carrying out the program. Preliminary criticism shows us a need for rational criteria for selection. Clearly, before we can devise what things need to be done, we need to develop a system for determining priorities.

In this section, we have tried to illustrate how to begin developing a plan, to illustrate the use of the report in determining a course of action. The section is *not* GAP's statement of high and immediate priorities. At present we have not resolved how much more we will work on this section, for our purpose is to develop a tool which associations, networks, and other groups can use in planning, not to do the planning for them.

### **A Planning Tool for the Profession**

In spite of the fact that the hierarchy we developed is cast in global terms, it is not a detailed blueprint for some archival utopia. Instead, it is an early stage in the development of a planning tool. Even so, this tool already should have some immediate use for the archival community as a whole. It can serve as a means of promoting consensus on major goals and objectives and in developing appropriate strategies to meet them; and, as suggested above, it serves as a means of establishing priorities for the achievement of specific courses of action. For the individual archivist and institution, it should serve as a basic reference as they go about their regular work and particularly as they consider special projects.

As this tool is refined and we devise improved models, longer-range uses

might include: (1) a basic yardstick for institutions and associations as they seek to coordinate the plans and priorities within the profession's broader goals and objectives; (2) a guideline for government and private funding agencies as they seek to develop funding priorities; and (3) a tool for professional associations as they develop programs dealing with broader goals and objectives for archivists. The GAP Task Force thinks this is a very important tool, but it is one that can stand a lot of improvement and one that is useless unless we can convince our fellow archivists to use it.

### **Buying into Planning as a Constant Process**

Indeed, our most critical work as a task force is ahead of us. We need to broaden the ownership of this report from the "Chicago 19" to the profession generally, for successful plans always have to be political as well as rational. Unless this report in its refined form represents the goals and objectives considered valid by a majority of archivists, it will have little use. For this reason, it is imperative that you review this document thoroughly. The report needs this kind of extensive review to make it a more useful tool. The document is intentionally and necessarily provisional and incomplete. With all its shortcomings, however, the report is a tribute to the effectiveness of the task force. Planning on this scale is a perilous business. Last year Julie Virgo told us of the difficulties in planning for an entire profession, something her profession—the library profession—has tried only once (at the White House Conference on Library and Information Services)—and they had millions of dollars with which to do it. But we archivists, as members of a developing profession,

simultaneously find ourselves at the center of the information revolution and must define both who we are and what our relationship is to the new conditions. Therefore, we must take this comprehensive and wide-ranging view of the tasks at hand. For these reasons the report cries out for exhaustive examination.

We need to do several things. We need to identify gaps and holes; and we also need to point out inappropriate directions and suggest more relevant activities. The review process began with the meeting of the State Historical Records Advisory Board Coordinators in July, 1984, and it continued at the SAA annual meeting in Washington, D.C., with three sessions, one devoted to each goal area. We will continue to use this same format at other meetings. I will be writing to the regionals and other organizations asking for their formal comment, particularly on the planning mechanism. I also have asked the SAA leadership—particularly section, task force, and committee heads—to undertake a systematic examination of the

report by their respective bodies.

We need your expertise—and in a way your partisanship—in examining particular issues and concerns; but because you are professionals, I know that you can distance yourselves, and critically appraise the document in a more holistic way.

## Conclusion

In his 1982 best-seller *Megatrends*, John Nesbitt wrote that we are living in “the time of the parenthesis,” the time between eras, between an industrial and an information society. This is a time of much uncertainty, and some of us, like Alice, do not know where we should go. But as Nesbitt points out, it is also a “yeasty time,” a time of opportunity in which more can be achieved than in more stable periods. In this time of “parenthesis,” Nesbitt observes, “we have extraordinary leverage and influence—individually, professionally, and institutionally—if we can only get a clear sense, a clear conception, a clear vision, of the road ahead.” This is the goal of the GAP report.