

# Preface

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The articles and annotated bibliography in this issue of the *American Archivist* are the result of work undertaken by the authors during the summer of 1982 at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Through funds received from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the library offered fellowships to each author under the Research Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives. These fellowships allowed the authors to reside in Ann Arbor for four months while conducting research on problems related to the appraisal of modern records. Their efforts represent the first published products of the ongoing Research Fellowship Program.

The program's purpose is to allow archivists, curators, records managers, historians, and other scholars and professionals interested in contemporary records to conduct research on problems associated with the creation, management, and use of modern documentation. The program has three goals: (1) to encourage advanced research on topics in archival administration of concern to the archival profession and the user com-

munities; (2) to enrich the professional literature by raising the level of discourse on archival problems through published material produced by the Research Fellows; and (3) to experiment with one vehicle promoting research, i.e., individual fellowships, and to evaluate its appropriateness for the archival profession.

The articles and bibliography in this issue focus on appraisal of modern records. In the first two years of its existence, the program concentrated on the problems of appraising modern records. These problems were seen essentially as inexhaustible questions requiring frameworks of analysis and an understanding of process, institutional structures, modes of communication, and the nature and function of records in a modern society. The articles in this issue build upon and have been enriched by the pioneering work of T.R. Schellenberg, Maynard Brichford, Phillip Brooks, and others who have worked to define the appraisal process. The authors have also benefitted by more recent work by Patricia Aronsson, Helen Samuels, F. Gerald Ham, and others who

are searching for new concepts and frameworks appropriate for the appraisal of modern records.

During the summer of 1983 the Bentley Library's Mellon Fellows were searching as well. Paul Chestnut explored the nature and functions of recordkeeping by state legislators. Leonard Rapport focused on the appraisal of case files generated by quasi-judicial federal agencies (e.g., the National Labor Relations Board). As part of a book-length study, JoAnne Yates analyzed the appraisal implications of changing patterns of communications in large business firms. Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young examined the appraisal process itself, exploring past premises and offering alternative methods for approaching the appraisal of university records.

Do the articles in this issue provide definitive answers to the appraisal questions addressed by the authors? No, probably not, but the nature of such inquiry is not to find absolutes, no matter how dearly we desire the black box that automatically solves complex problems simply and routinely. Rather, the emphasis is to push the profession to think critically, to raise the level of discourse on questions of profound relevance as to how we document our culture. We need to ask questions about our theories and procedures and, when appropriate, pose alternative structures and strategies. A goal of the fellowship program is to stimulate seasoned practitioners to think and write about the challenges facing our profession. In the face of new conditions we must ask what are the implications of following time-honored theories, methodologies, and procedures for

managing the culture's written, visual, and recorded documentation.

Certainly many of the principles and practices we accept and use are valid, but basic research is needed in almost every area of archival work. Topics in need of critical study have been described in many forums such as the Society of American Archivists' Goals and Priorities Task Force, the National Information Systems Task Force, and the Joint Committee on Archives of Science and Technology, as well as in the state records assessment studies funded by NHPRC. In response to this growing research agenda, the Bentley Library has opened the scope of its fellowship program and encourages proposals that engage critical issues (including appraisal) in the administration and use of modern archives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Applications for the Summer 1986 fellowship program must be postmarked by December 16, 1985. For application forms and further information, write to Research Fellowship Program, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1150 Beal Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2113.