

Shorter Features

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require full-length articles. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Maygene Daniels, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC 20565. Christopher Beam has stepped down as the editor and deserves the appreciation of the journal's readers for a job well done.

Archival Advisory Committees: Why?

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Is an advisory committee or board worth having? A committee can assist an archives in fulfilling its mission and in promoting its goals and objectives. Alternatively, a committee can prove to be an obstacle instead of a help and, at worst, become an albatross around the archivist's neck. Committees require some expenditure of resources, ranging from at least the archivist's and members' time, to expenses for members' travel and per diem as well. This expenditure ought to buy a good product.

This article explores ways in which a committee can be helpful and offers

recommendations about using a committee. The main point, however, is to urge that archivists define carefully the purpose in having an advisory committee and take all appropriate steps to ensure that the purpose is accomplished. Topics include suggested functions, composition, and control of advisory committees. Archivists who are considering establishing an advisory committee will find the article more useful than those who currently operate with one. The latter may find some advice helpful, but they may be unable to carry out other recommendations.

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This article is not based on a survey of the profession, and archivists may have other or additional examples of ways they have used committees successfully. Furthermore, different types of repositories—i.e., business, religious, or college and university archives—will have varying reasons for having an advisory committee. Nevertheless, surveying successes and failures, adding examples of usefulness, and discussing committees in different types of archives undoubtedly will confirm the point of this article: determining the purpose of a committee is essential.

An advisory committee or board is not an administrative board, and Stephen A. McCarthy provides a useful distinction: "Advisory committees or boards do not have final authority or responsibility, but they do have the power to study, investigate, plan and make recommendations; administrative boards have full authority and responsibility, and, in addition to the functions of the advisory group, they have the further responsibility of determining policy and of seeing that it is put into effect."¹ Archivists already have to deal with one administrative structure. Adding still another probably creates more difficulties than benefits.²

Using a strict definition, an advisory committee does just that: offers advice. Such a passive group seems of little use, however, because archivists can obtain advice from many other sources—staff, colleagues, and other archivists. If the archives really needs only advice, a committee seems a cumbersome and time-consuming way of obtaining it. Furthermore, a group created to offer advice

only about archival matters might cast doubt on the credentials and skill of the archivist.³ Usually an archives wants an advisory committee to advance larger goals and to serve purposes other than merely offering advice. This article therefore discusses groups characterized more correctly as activist or advocacy rather than as advisory. Some suggested activities in this article can and should be carried out by other groups, such as archives' "friends groups" or "support groups." The article's major point about definition of purpose, however, remains the same for any group attached or related to the archives.

Among the critical questions to ask before creating a committee are: Why have an advisory committee? What is its basic purpose? What will it consider? What will it decide?

A lack of clear definition of purpose is the greatest single problem of advisory committees. The purpose must be defined very carefully and clearly in writing. Without such a definition, the committee may attempt to assume an administrative role in the internal management of the archives, or a committee may become a useless formality, wasting everyone's time. In defining the purpose, the archivist should determine whether the purpose can be achieved by others, including the staff, without a committee. All parties need to understand the committee's reason to exist and know why and how the committee is expected to accomplish its purpose.

An advisory committee can be a temporary body, created for a short-term purpose and then dissolved. For example,

¹Stephen A. McCarthy, "Advisory Committee or Administrative Board?" *Library Quarterly* 22 (July 1952): 224.

²McCarthy's model, the corporation, seems inapplicable enough to libraries as he uses it. It has even less relevance to archives where, typically, only the archivist understands the archives' basic purpose and functions well enough to determine policy.

³Many grant applications, particularly for new archival programs, propose advisory committees which seem to reflect this doubt.

William A. Moss recommends that an advisory committee can help develop an oral history program, but that the committee "ought to outlive its usefulness rapidly as a program develops its own standards and momentum, and the advisors should be disbanded as soon as it is apparent that the program is doing well."⁴ A committee created for a special fundraising campaign offers another example of a temporary purpose. Any committee requires a clear and carefully defined purpose, but a temporary committee also needs a clear time limit on its existence.

Committees can fulfill one or many purposes. Primarily they can assist in improving funding and visibility. While the suggestions and examples below are not comprehensive, they should stimulate archivists to think about the purpose in having a committee.

An advisory committee ought to be able to help the archives operate within its administrative structure and gain support from higher authorities. For example, the committee might assist the archives in securing a basic archival mandate and policies for access and collecting. All archives need a mandate and policies approved by the highest institutional authority, and an advisory committee could prove useful in obtaining this approval. A committee should not, however, formulate or decide these policies; rather, given the earlier distinction between advisory and administrative bodies, it should merely approve them.

The major example of help within the administrative structure is committee assistance in obtaining an adequate archival budget. The archives must compete with other institutional units, yet the archives requests funds not for itself but for service to others. This product is

poorly measured and little understood. An advisory committee can serve as an effective voice in convincing budget authorities of the complex nature of the product and the need for sound funding.⁵

A committee should be able to help the archives get money externally as well as internally. Outside the institution, a committee can assist in or perform fund raising. Since all archives need more funding, a committee's competence in helping secure financial assistance—internally, externally, or both—could be the major factor in deciding whether or not to have a committee.

A committee can help carry out archival decisions. Members might, for example, cultivate potential donors that the archives has deemed essential. Within an institution, a committee could bring pressure on department heads to participate in a records management program.

A committee can perform a public relations function, publicizing the archives' mission and generating support beyond the financial. Examples include advertising the archives' holdings, exhibits, and special events. A committee could encourage greater use of the archives, ensure wide distribution of archival publications, and, in general, help the archives gain visibility, both within and outside the institution. This would be particularly useful to a small archives where staff limitations prevent greater outreach or public relations activities.

Finally, service on a committee will contribute to the members' knowledge and understanding of the archives and its problems and of the archival profession generally. The education of committee members should not be the sole reason to have a committee, but it can prove beneficial, particularly if committee

⁴William A. Moss, *Oral History Program Manual* (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 20.

⁵McCarthy, "Advisory Committee," p. 227.

membership includes high level administrators of the institution.

As stated before, a committee should not set policy and procedures for the archives or perform any archival administrative duties. It also should not do the archivist's job. The functions of acquisitions, appraisal, preservation, processing, and reference are the expertise of the archivist, not the committee. For example, committee members should not collect without the archives' approval, grant exclusive access to favored researchers, or appraise collections. If the archivist asks for committee decisions in the field of archival expertise, he or she is delegating that expertise and may be left with decisions that are archivally unsound. If the archivist asks for advice in these areas, the committee should understand that the archivist, as the expert, makes the final judgments.

Given the varied ways in which an advisory committee can support the archives, the archivist ought to consider the name and not automatically call the group "advisory." For example, a group created to help with a records management program might be called more correctly the "Records Committee," and one with an outreach focus might have the name "Community Affairs Committee."

The committee's purpose will define its composition. If the purpose is prescribed carefully and clearly, selection of committee members should be evident. At the very least, members should have the time for and interest in serving on the committee; they should want the job. Members also should have some understanding of the nature of the archives, ask thoughtful questions, and bring to the committee some specialized knowledge that the archives needs. Representation by different

groups can be important, if the interests represented can be secured to the support of the archives. The following examples are, again, not definitive but might serve as suggestions.

Representation from the institution's administration is essential if the committee's purpose is to help the archives within the administrative structure. The dean in charge of the budget at a college, for example, could assist a college archives in obtaining adequate funding. A member of the board of directors could help secure board approval for basic policies. Senior management representation is highly desirable if it provides management with an understanding it would not have had otherwise.⁶

Other institutional members could be useful. Faculty members could help a college or university archives build greater use of the archives, if that is one objective of having a committee. Or department heads could assist in implementing a records management program—another possible committee purpose.

If fund raising is the major purpose in establishing a committee, a proven fund raiser should be a member. This purpose should be achieved, however; a reputable person who does not produce does not fulfill his or her purpose for being on the committee.

Outside professionals—for example, other archivists—may provide productive advice. The archivist should question, however, whether their advice might be acquired without service on a committee, either informally or formally as consultants. A fellow professional might also bring into question the archivist's own expertise.

In selecting members for particular results, the archivist should ask whether the same ends could be achieved more

⁶Ibid., p. 229.

quickly and economically by the archival staff or by informal or formal consultation with others, rather than through establishment of a committee. A committee must achieve its purpose, or it is not worth the time and resources it requires.

The archivist should have as much control as possible over the committee. I endorse Mort Grant's advice and "both emphasize and urge a manipulative attitude toward an advisory committee."⁷ The archivist should select matters for committee consideration, determine what issues it will decide, and control the timing and manner in which these subjects are presented. The archivist should also chair the meetings and control the agenda.

The archivist should select the members of the committee. If this is not entirely possible, the archivist should compile a list of recommended members, providing more names than are required, and supply justifications for selection to the person who does choose the members. It is irritating and paralyzing to cope with committee members unsympathetic to the archives' goals or members

who want the archives to go in inappropriate directions.

Control of the committee and the committee's effectiveness depend upon the skills of the archivist. The archivist must plan and guide the operation of the committee, analyze complex problems, present clear and brief solutions, possess good interpersonal skills, and limit the loss of control at every step. Indeed, Grant goes so far as to quote Machiavelli: "Wise counsels, from whoever they come, must necessarily be due to the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince to the good counsels received."⁸ In working with an advisory committee, an archivist cannot be indecisive, ineffective, and lack confidence in his or her own professional competence.

Defining the purpose of a committee is paramount. A committee will be useful to the archivist who has determined carefully the purpose of the committee, selected committee members that can achieve that purpose, and maintained control over the committee. That archivist knows "why."

⁷Mort Grant, "The Technology of Advisory Committees," in *Public Policy: A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University*, vol. 10, ed. Carl J. Friedrich and Seymour E. Harris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p.92.

⁸Ibid.