

Methodology as Outreach: A Public Mini-Course on Archival Principles and Techniques

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Suggested strategies for archival outreach usually focus on promoting research use of the collections archivists maintain. Recent discussions on enhancing the profession's image among the public, however, also have concluded that archivists can and should encourage an appreciation of the curatorial methods they employ.

Ironically, although archivists work hardest at marketing collections, it may be archival methods, particularly preservation skills, that most intrigue the general public. People who are wholly unfamiliar with the significance, usefulness, or even the meaning of archives often are extremely interested in learning how to manage and care for their own records. For instance, how many archivists, after trying to explain what they do for a living, have been greeted with the reply, "I have these old photographs in my attic—what should I do with them?" The archivist's ability to satisfy such interests offers the opportunity to cultivate closer ties between the archival community and the rest of society.

Archivists can exercise this type of outreach in a number of ways. Some of the more common include lectures or workshops on basic conservation practices, consultation services about establishing archives, and assistance in producing historical displays for various types of community institutions or groups.

Another approach has been implemented recently at the University of Toledo with promising results. The university offers a public, noncredit mini-course on the recognition, appreciation,

and basic care of historical records commonly found in the home. The course is sponsored by the university's Division of Continuing Education and is directed toward individuals seeking advice on how to properly maintain their own documents and memorabilia. Entitled "Historical Family Records: How to Recognize and Preserve," the class is taught by an archivist and carries a \$35.00 standard continuing education fee (anyone over 60 years of age may enroll free). Meetings take place in the special collections and archives department of the university library, and classes are limited in size to twelve students. The participants represent a variety of age groups and interests. Genealogists and local history enthusiasts constitute the majority, although others who simply have materials they want to preserve have also attended. Many of the students have never before visited an archival facility.

Five general topics comprise the course, which is presented in a series of two-hour sessions. Instructional methods mainly include hands-on and visual demonstrations. Although no readings are required, a brief list of current literature on session topics is provided for those who wish to explore matters in greater detail. As a single orientation-type work, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, by David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty (American Association of State and Local History, 1982), coincides most closely with the scope, content, and philosophy of the course.

The point is made early and emphasized repeatedly that the course is intend-

ed not to train but to acquaint. Applying most archival and conservation techniques requires considerably more preparation than such an awareness course can furnish, and students must understand that clearly. With this lesson of caution and respect, however, also comes the message that these principles and practices should not be considered by the lay person as entirely mysterious, incomprehensible, or even inapplicable.

The primary aim of the first session is to provide class members a basis for identifying and interpreting their records. Students view slides of documents frequently encountered in the home and discuss informational quality and reliability considerations for each type. The class also is introduced to different perspectives on the meaning of history. This affords an opportunity to encourage traditional genealogists to adopt a broader perspective. The course stresses that full appreciation of family heritage requires at least a basic knowledge of the local and national context in which family records were created.

The second session, preservation problems and solutions, unquestionably ranks as the most popular. The central message is a simple one—certain external agents accelerate document deterioration, and people can take steps to help prevent such damage. On the grounds that shock generates concern, students are shown a vivid sampling of the enemies of paper at work. This sampling consists of damaged documents found in the university's special collections and archives department during the past few years. Heavy emphasis is placed on the difference between preservation, which can be applied in part by the lay person, and restoration, which cannot. Class members receive advice on preferred environmental conditions, safe storage equipment, proper handling techniques, and whom to con-

tact (locally in particular) for supplies or assistance with special problems. Some archival supply companies have, upon request, furnished free catalogs for distribution to the class. In addition, students participate in demonstrations of dry surface cleaning, encapsulation, and minor repairs with Japanese tissue, again involving records from the archives or occasionally items brought by the students themselves.

Of the various types of personal records, photographs are generally the most abundant and often the most treasured. The third session deals with the special preservation considerations involved with this type of record. Key information includes the distinguishing characteristics of common photographic processes and some standard principles for labeling and storing images. Examples from the archives and from the collections of class members are used to prompt discussion of these issues. To emphasize the informational value and intrinsic qualities of photographs, students are given time to share information about the subject matter and provenance of a few of their favorite items.

The fourth session is devoted to oral history. Most class members indicate they previously have considered producing tape-recorded interviews, and some even have tried their hand at it. This session offers guidelines for enhancing the quality of such efforts, covering the oral history process from preparatory activities through interviewing methods to preservation factors. Students are shown a slide presentation of the procedures used in an interview, and they are given the opportunity to listen and react to tapes produced by the archives. Since the intended use of interviews in these cases is generally quite limited and personal, legal issues and processing procedures, including transcription, are addressed only

briefly, with the addendum that further information can and should be sought as needed.

Generally, even more historically-minded citizens fail to realize that the documents they hold may be of interest to historical repositories. The final class session addresses issues surrounding the donation of manuscript collections from the perspective of both donor and archivist. Students are given brochures and other information describing the collection strengths of area archival institutions and are urged to become better acquainted with their services and facilities. This meeting also includes some practical tips on producing worthwhile and long-lasting records of the present, such as journals, photographs, and audiovisual recordings.

A course such as this can yield a number of benefits for the sponsoring archival institution, but it is also not without possible pitfalls. If carelessly taught, students could be lulled into a sense of overconfidence in their newly-acquired preservation skills. A little knowledge is sometimes more dangerous than none; if proper cautions are not conveyed, significant historical documents might be damaged through unsupervised experimentation. An overly confident attitude toward evaluating and caring for materials also might prompt the owner of an especially rich collection to ignore the merits of donating the collection to an archival repository.

Such outcomes are, however, both unlikely and avoidable, and the real advantages of this undertaking far outweigh the hypothetical problems. Even the

purist conservator should agree that countless more private manuscript materials are lost through benign indifference than possibly could be destroyed through ill-advised intervention. The information presented in the course can help ensure that some significant, previously unknown collections are at least saved from total destruction.

The course actually stimulates rather than inhibits collection donation and thereby serves as an effective acquisition program supplement. While students are taught to appreciate and care for their materials on their own, they are shown that collections are more widely appreciated and better cared for in an archives. Additional donor contacts in the form of class member acquaintances surface as well. Along with becoming more sensitive to area archival collecting objectives, students also recognize that archives contain information of potential use for expanding their historical knowledge or interests.

In the final analysis, the chief dividends of such an endeavor might be of a less immediate or measurable nature. By sharing expertise through vehicles such as the above, an archivist places himself before the public in an unusual but effective way. Essentially, the archival service role is extended beyond that of informational resource to include technical advisor, thus satisfying a public demand. Creative exploration and exploitation of this demand cannot help but advance public understanding of the value and relevance of archival institutions.