What Is the *Use* of Archives?
A Challenge for the Profession

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Abstract: Archivists need to reconsider and develop new approaches to the important issue of the *use* of archival material. Six approaches to this challenge are suggested and discussed: developing better means of tracking research use; improving procedures for interpreting and reporting on that use; promoting increased research use; emphasizing use as a means of garnering program support; reaching out to the user community for assistance in dealing with certain archival issues; and expanding the concept of reference service to a broader notion of researcher service or public service.

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WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE and impact of research in archives? What difference does research in archives make—in terms of individual enlightenment, solution of practical problems, benefits to the public good, scholarly advances, growing human self-understanding, or additions to the sum total of human knowledge? In short, what is the *use* of archives?

Most archivists would find it difficult to answer such questions, either for their own repository or for all archival programs. Archivists have given relatively little attention to the issue of who uses their materials and what difference that use makes. The profession has concentrated on developing and refining a body of theory and techniques on appraisal, arrangement and description, physical preservation, and reference services to researchers. Yet the ultimate goal of archival work is to identify and preserve information that is put to *use* by people for some deliberate purpose. The value of the records archivists so carefully collect and preserve depends on the importance of their information, and that, in turn, depends on who uses the records and for what purposes. Furthermore, the research use of the material is one important basis of convincing appeals for program resources and support—an important consideration, since many of the nation's archival programs are underdeveloped and underfunded.

For many reasons, the question of research use of archives is important but until recently the issue has received little attention and analysis. Archivists need to analyze the use of holdings in order to more clearly define their professional mission, to help persuade resource allocators that archival work is significant, and to gain the general public's attention and support for the importance of the archival function in society. This article advances a framework for analyzing and suggestions for dealing with this neglected issue.

Now is an appropriate time for facing this important question. The past few years have been a period of growth and change in the archival world, of questioning traditional approaches, and of searching for new directions. Indeed, the recent past may someday be known as the Age of Archival Analysis because of the many important studies that have been carried out. For instance, forty-three of the states have completed assessment and reporting projects which, taken together, constitute the most searching analysis of historical records programming ever undertaken. The Society of American Archivists' Task Force on Goals and Priorities has issued the profession's first comprehensive statement on long-term objectives. The Task Force on Archives and Society has been probing the public's "image" of archival work and searching for ways to improve public understanding and support. These studies have raised questions about the nature and purposes of archival work and have led to new insights and plans for the future.[1]

This healthy spirit of archival self-evaluation is evident in the writings on archivists' relations with researchers. Mary Jo Pugh, Elsie Freeman, and William Joyce, for instance, have demonstrated major defects in the ways archivists serve researchers. They suggest that archivists do not really know their clientele and that they have an inaccurate notion of the information researchers need and how they seek it.[2] Roy C. Turnbaugh has suggested

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[1] Larry J. Hackman, "A Perspective on American Archives," *Public Historian* 8 (Summer 1986): 10–28, provides an excellent summary of recent developments.

[2] Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and The Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33–44; Elsie Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111–23; William L. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 124–33.

that archivists produce finding aids that are either ignored or are difficult to use and that archivists cling to outdated concepts inappropriate for modern researchers' approaches and needs.[3] William J. Maher and Paul Conway have proposed systematic ways to improve tracking and measuring of research use of archival holdings.[4] The general conclusion of these studies is that more systematic user studies are needed, as are improved services to researchers.

Archivists need to do more, however, than just study users and refine the reference services traditionally rendered. They must address fundamental questions, heretofore largely ignored, about the relationship between archivists and researchers and about the nature and significance of research use of archival materials. There are at least six areas where analysis and new approaches are needed: (1) tracking and studying research use, (2) interpreting and reporting on the significance of that use, (3) promoting increased use, (4) emphasizing use as a means of garnering program support, (5) reaching out to the researcher community as a partner in dealing with difficult archival problems, and (6) expanding the concept of reference service to a broader notion of researcher service

or public service. These ideas are developed in detail below.

First, *archivists must develop more effective, realistic means of tracking and analyzing use.* As a profession, we have been too complacent and disinterested in systematically keeping track of research use of holdings. Even the best archival literature reflects this indifference. The standard text in the manuscripts field casually suggests that ". . . probably the curator will keep a record" of use, primarily to guide future acquisitions decisions, monitor frequency of use, detect theft—and to assemble figures for the annual report.[5] The SAA basic manual on reference advises recording researchers' identities, research topics, and the records they use, but it gives little guidance on how to interpret and report this information.[6]

The state assessment reports reveal the shocking fact that many repositories do not even keep counts of researchers. In Virginia, for instance, 42 percent of repositories surveyed reported they did not know the number of researchers served annually. In Kentucky, the figure was 50 percent. In North Dakota, it was an incredible 69 percent![7] Furthermore, most repositories that keep a count do not interpret the numbers or attempt to

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[3]Roy C. Turnbaugh, "Living With a Guide," *American Archivist* 46 (Fall 1983): 451; Turnbaugh, "Archival Mission and User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 27–33.

[4]William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 15–26; Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393–407; Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 35–56. See also Jacqueline Goggin, "The Indirect Approach: A Study of Scholarly Use of Black and Women's Organizational Records in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 57–67.

[5]Kenneth Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), 239–40.

[6]Sue E. Holbert, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 23.

[7]Virginia State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Public and Private Records Repositories in Virginia: A Needs Assessment Report* (Richmond: 1983), 110; Kentucky Historical Records Advisory Board, *Historical Records Needs Assessment Final Report* (Frankfort, 1983): 31; North Dakota State Historical Records Advisory Board, *North Dakota's Forgotten Heritage: Public and Private Records as Historical Documents* (Bismark: 1983), 34. Other state reports bear out this pattern. The figures are slightly misleading, however, because the smaller repositories are primarily the most lax about maintaining such statistics.

draw conclusions about or report on their significance. The State Archives of New Jersey, for instance, counts researchers but does not keep track of "types of researchers or purposes of record use."[8]

Merely counting and recording the numbers of researchers and categorizing them under a few headings conceived by the archivist tells little about the significance and impact of research use. Archivists must move beyond this superficial "numbers" approach. "Many archives have a few numbers to show that their holdings are used," observes William J. Maher. But without analysis, "most archivists' understanding of the use of their holdings is sketchy at best." This hampers them in making program modifications intended to increase and facilitate use, and it deprives them of "an important tool to justify programs and secure greater resources." Maher has proposed helpful methodologies for regular analysis of daily use and for specialized studies of specific aspects of reference services.[9] His work should serve as the basis for further analysis and development in this area.

Paul Conway has gone even further in a pioneering article certain to provoke much-needed discussion and debate in the profession. He advocates "a comprehensive, profession-wide program of user studies" and has proposed a framework for "the basic elements of information that should be recorded, analyzed, and shared among archivists to assess programs and services." In Conway's proposed scheme, archivists would measure and assess three elements of reference services: (1) quality—how well archivists understand and meet the information needs of their users; (2) integrity—how well archivists balance their obligations to preserve materials against their obligations to make them available; and (3) value—the effects of use on individuals, groups, and society as a whole. Conway also provides a form to serve as the basis for gathering information needed to pursue the analyses he advocates.[10] While Conway's detailed scheme may prove too complex for some repositories to implement, his work has nonetheless clearly called attention to the need for repositories to focus on the interchange between archivist and researcher and to seek deeper insight into researchers' use of archives.

More discussion and development is needed. The profession needs more and better tools for monitoring research use. The forms, procedures, and approaches should gather information needed to thoroughly understand researchers' purposes and the significance of the information derived from the archival material. Of course, the gathering of such information would require cooperation on the part of researchers. These key questions would need answering:

- What was the exact subject and purpose of the research?
- How did the researcher find out about the repository and the materials? What are the implications for the repository's finding aids and public relations efforts?
- What records were used?
- What was the researcher's information need? What were the questions that he or she needed to answer?
- Did the researcher find the information sought, anticipated, or needed?
- How rich and extensive was the information gleaned from the records? How significant was the information for the researcher's purposes?

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[8]New Jersey State Historical Records Advisory Board, *New Jersey Records Assessment and Reporting Project* (Trenton: 1983), 8.
[9]Maher, "Use of User Studies," 15.
[10]Conway, "Facts and Frameworks," 394 and *passim*.

- Did the information cast new light on or lead to a new interpretation of the subject being researched?
- Did study of the material suggest or open important new lines of inquiry for the researcher?
- Did study of the material uncover or suggest other sources for the researcher to pursue?

Second, *archivists need to find better means of measuring and interpreting the significance of research use.* Few archival institutions have carried out systematic user studies. The profession has never produced a national report on "Research in Archives: Significance and Impact." Such studies are needed to clarify for ourselves and to enable us to explain to others the importance of research in archives.

If significance is equated with numbers, then the majority of use probably is genealogical. Certainly genealogical research is important in a nation made up of immigrants' descendants with considerable interest in personal and family "roots." Research by academic historians is also important, though the degree of reliance that historians place on archival sources needs further study.[11] But archivists' traditional concerns with genealogists and historians may cause them to miss an important point about use: numbers do not necessarily equal significance. Not all users should be counted equally because some uses, measured in terms of the archival program's mission and in terms of the utility of the information derived, may be more significant than others. The key to understanding the difficult issue of significance of use is to derive and apply reasonable, consistent standards of measurement.

Archivists need to develop at least two types of standards.

One standard is the significance of the research use in terms of the archival program's own mission and priorities. Every program should include in its mission statement, planning documents, or in some other written form a statement of why it exists, what records it aims to collect, what it aims to document, and what types of research it is most interested in encouraging and supporting. A state archival program, for instance, may decide that its primary client is state government. A repository that collects medical records may decide that its primary mission is to support medical research. A community historical society may decide that its primary interest is to support research in local history. The intention is not to deprive anyone of access to the records or to slight any researcher's work but, instead, to indicate preferences and priorities. Without such a settled indication, the repository has little choice but to regard all research interests and topics as equal. With such an indication, there is an established benchmark against which to measure significance of use.

The second standard of measurement is more complicated; it focuses on the significance of the topic, ramifications of the research, and dissemination of the results. Here the objective is to look beyond "use" in the elementary sense—directly seeking and deriving information from archival material. Instead, the focus turns to ultimate users and beneficiaries—"people who may never visit an archives but utilize archival information indirectly."[12] Among the key questions in applying this standard might be the following: Did the research provide

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[11]See Fredric Miller, "Use, Appraisal, and Research: A Case Study of Social History," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 371–92 for thoughtful analysis in the area of social history.
[12]Conway, "Facts and Frameworks," 396.

significant new information about an important subject? Are there legal ramifications to the research findings? Will the welfare of an individual or group be affected? Will important institutional or public undertakings be affected or significantly redirected? How will the conclusions and results of the research be disseminated? Who can be expected to study and use the results, and for what purposes? And what changes can be expected as a result of the use of this information?

A number of recent studies have pointed the way toward further development of this second type of standard. The Connecticut and New York historical records assessment reports, for instance, demonstrate that there are many uses of historical records that are not always apparent to the general public or even to archivists. These reports provide examples of practical uses of historical records with far-reaching implications. Businesses, governments, and other institutions need archival records for retrospective policy analysis and to provide continuity in administration. Government records document the responsibilities of government and the rights of its citizens. They are often essential in legal matters—to document agreements, substantiate claims, and prove contentions.

Engineers use old plans, maps, sketches, reports, and specifications for information on the location, age, and physical characteristics of the infrastructure. Historical preservationists use photographs, blueprints, and drawings to determine the original appearance of buildings, reveal structural elements, and guide authentic restoration. Environmen-tal researchers use historical records to study land use patterns, water use, and other environmental issues. Medical researchers use patient files and other records to understand genetic and familial diseases and to trace the impact of epidemics. Seismologists use descriptions of earthquakes in diaries to determine the location and magnitude of previous quakes. Educators use historical records to supplement textbook and lecture presentations, giving local history courses an immediacy and letting students study key source materials. The New York report concludes emphatically that "historical records are important to the well-being of New York and to the welfare of its citizens . . . historical records have a variety of immediate, practical uses with everyday implications for all of us." The Connecticut report agrees: "clearly, historical records play a larger role in our lives than most people suspect."[13]

A brochure issued by the SAA's Task Force on Archives and Society plays up the same theme. It suggests that archival material can be used to protect citizens' rights, increase business profits, preserve historic buildings, provide administrative continuity, and educate and entertain, as well as to sustain genealogical and historical research. "In one way or another, directly or indirectly, you [the public] use, benefit from and have a definite stake in the preservation of archives," it concludes.[14]

How should archivists improve their abilities to track and measure use? One simple device is the exit interview, which allows the archivist to ask about the researcher's use of the records and about

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[13]Connecticut Historical Records Advisory Board, *Final Report of Historical Records Assessment Project, 1982–1983* (n.p.: 1983), 1–5; New York State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Toward a Usable Past: Historical Records in the Empire State* (Albany: 1984), 19–24. Oddly enough, few of the state assessment projects sought users' views of archival affairs or included in their reports any discussion of the significance of use of archival material.

[14]"Who is the 'I' in Archives," brochure, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985).

the extent and importance of the information derived. Archivists need not and should not forget about researchers after they go out of the repository's door. One way of keeping in touch and finding out the results of the research is to send out questionnaires to researchers some weeks or months after their visit. The questionnaires can identify how the information from the archives contributed to the overall research effort and determine the publication or other dissemination of the results. Analysis of citations to archival resources in professional literature is another way of gauging the significance and extent of research use. Archivists can help organize sessions at professional meetings to encourage researchers to discuss their use of archival material. Archivists should also consider publishing explanations of particularly important or innovative uses of the material in their repositories.

As a third new approach, *archivists must confront the problem of underutilization of archival resources.* Archivists have traditionally measured use in terms of how many times a collection or document is used or how many researchers call, write, or visit during a given period of time. This focus on numbers rather than significance has obscured the need for a more realistic measure of the adequacy of use. That measure might be as follows: To what extent have the records been used by people who had an information need that was (or could have been) satisfied by research in the records? No matter how archivists measure adequacy of use, however, there are several reasons why archival resources are underutilized.

First, a large percentage of the nation's archival resources are so poorly maintained, incompletely processed, and inadequately described that they are virtually inaccessible. Archivists are not to blame; the underlying reason for this state of affairs is lack of sufficient resources and people. In California, according to its state assessment report, most repositories are "understaffed, underbudgeted, and without a clear direction of what to collect or how to provide for the physical care of their holdings." In Kentucky, "the financial resources of the vast majority of historical records repositories are inadequate by any standards." In North Carolina, repositories have "responsibilities that exceed their resources." And in New York, "most historical records repositories lack the facilities, resources, and staff expertise to carry out core functions in a minimally acceptable way."[15]

This lack of resources is at least partially due to archivists' difficulties in gaining public attention and support. There is a vicious cycle here, however, for such support would be easier to obtain if records use could be increased and more effectively tracked and publicized. In any case, lack of resources means that many collections are sitting in a sort of archival abeyance—unprocessed and unusable.

Furthermore, as the assessment reports reveal, a shockingly large percentage of repositories have inadequate finding aids or none at all. Many do not report accessions or holdings to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscripts Collections*, scholarly journals, or anywhere else researchers would encounter the informa-

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[15]California State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Final Report of the California State Archives Assessment Project* (Sacramento: 1983), 22; Kentucky Historical Records Advisory Board, *Historical Records Needs Assessment*, 29; North Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board, *North Carolina Historical Records Assessment Report* (Raleigh: 1983), 40; New York State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Toward a Usable Past*, 53.

tion. As the California assessment report observed, "the public is unlikely to use materials well if they do not know the materials exist."[16]

A second major reason for low incidence of use is that archivists are too often satisfied to serve only the limited reference traffic that happens to come their way. Archival reference has been too narrowly conceptualized as a passive, reactive service that is not activated until a letter arrives, the phone rings, or a researcher comes through the door. Archivists have not realized that promoting maximum appropriate use of their holdings should be a centerpiece of the archival mission. They have not concentrated on encouraging and expanding use of materials by those people and groups whose information needs could be satisfied by research in archival holdings. "Archives have some of the best kept secrets in the country," notes the director of a manuscripts collection. "We as archivists may know some of these secrets, but we have not made an effort to share them with those for whom the secrets can be important. We cannot blame the public for not utilizing our resources and not appreciating our value. . . . We have not made our story known."[17]

The state assessment reports bear out this view. In Pennsylvania, for instance, "materials [in archival repositories] are not being used to any great extent" largely because researchers simply do not know the material exists.[18] A summary of the state government sections of the reports concludes that "the posture of

state archives toward researchers is generally passive. Despite archivists' claim that their records are essential to the continuity and effective administration of government, little evidence supports that claim. [There is] little evidence that state archivists have clearly defined the products of their work or have convincingly demonstrated the value of these products to their states."[19] A summary of the sections on historical records repositories notes that "lack of public understanding and regard leads to underfunding of historical records repositories and underutilization of their holdings. The process has a circular effect in that low use perpetuates low funding which prevents repositories from upgrading the management of their collections which might in turn increase their use."[20]

As the SAA's *Planning for the Archival Profession* concludes, "at present, the many possible uses of archives are not widely recognized and archival records are underused. . . . the archival community must reduce existing barriers and undertake positive steps to promote the use of archives."[21] A massive campaign is needed—one that includes educational and promotional efforts that reach out to researchers, more widespread dissemination of descriptive information on archival records, and aggressive appeals to researchers whose work would be enriched by using archival materials.

There is a third obstacle to greater utilization of archives: with few exceptions, college and university students are not taught to use archival materials for

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[16]California State Historical Records Advisory Board, *Final Report*, 7.

[17]Gordon O. Hendrickson to Frank Mackaman, 13 January 1984, Records of SAA Task Force on Archives and Society.

[18]Leon J. Stout, *Historical Records in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: 1983), 13.

[19]Edwin C. Bridges, "State Government Records Programs," in *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, ed. Lisa Weber (Albany: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1984), 8.

[20]William L. Joyce, "Historical Records Repositories," in *Documenting America*, 39.

[21]*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 22.

research. There is no adequate publication explaining research in archives; the closest substitute is Philip Brooks' *Research in Archives*, a short, outdated work that is not well known in scholarly circles.[22] There are few college research methodology courses that cover archival materials. Archivists need to reach out to and cooperate with historians and other professionals whose research interests and needs should naturally lead them into archival repositories. More writing is needed about the content, research importance, and usefulness of archival material. Archivists should work with professionals to develop courses that lead students "to expand their awareness of what documentation is available, how it grew out of and affected the historical 'event' under study, and to help them make more creative use of available documents."[23] Repositories should sponsor workshops and seminars to show researchers how to use archival sources and to introduce them to materials in specific subject fields.

A fourth new line of attack follows logically from the three discussed above. *Archivists need to focus attention on and publicize significant use of their material* in order to improve support for archival programs. The challenge is to convince the public of the value and impact of research use of archival materials. David Gracy has argued that the public perceives archivists as "permanently humped, moleish, aged creatures who shuffle musty documents in dust-filled attics for a purpose uncertain."[24] One way to correct at least the "purpose uncer-

tain" part of that misconception is to make known the significance and importance of archival work.

The place to begin is at home. A recent SAA study revealed that the people who control and allocate resources for archival programs tend to view archivists as scholarly, dedicated professionals who are not assertive or deserving of increased program support. ". . . the purposes, uses, and contributions of the archives have to be made more vivid—more explicit, more concrete, and repeated in various ways [through] communication of a steady flow of examples to heighten awareness and appreciation of what is being gotten for the money," says the report. "Archivists need to translate their importance into more power. That requires more self-assertion, more concerted action, and being less sympathetic to or understanding of the resource allocators' budget problems."[25]

Making the case to resource allocators is a good start, but archivists also need to direct the public's attention to the use of archival material. As one state assessment report pointed out, "it is easy to ignore [historical records]. They do not crowd the streets, nor do they complain, write letters, lobby, or vote . . . they are known only to a few."[26] But how do archivists get the message across to the public? Archivists provided the following suggestions and insights to the Task Force on Archives and Society:

A university archivist: ". . . the view of the public toward us will never significantly change unless we alter our practice

[22]Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969).

[23]Clark Elliot, ed., *Understanding Progress as Process: Documentation of the History of Science and Technology in the United States* (n.p.: 1983), 52–53.

[24]David B. Gracy, "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 8.

[25]Social Research, Inc., *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perception* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984), 4.

[26]*Preserving Arizona's Historical Records: The Final Report of the Arizona Historical Records Needs and Assessment Project* (Phoenix: 1983), i.

of catering almost exclusively to the scholarly community. Outreach (particularly to non-traditional users) needs to be recognized as important a function of an archival program as reference or processing. We've got to do more than just be custodians. Practical uses for records need to be identified and developed. Once that is accomplished, and the public is using our records, we won't need to change our image; we will have done it already."

The associate director of a university manuscripts collection: "Although some sections of society will probably never appreciate the importance of preserving our documentary heritage, they may well respond to the practical uses of archives. Compiling examples of archival uses which increase efficiency, reduce costs or generally make life easier, would greatly enhance our image."

A Canadian provincial archivist: "It is a good plan to indicate the overall services to the citizens at large which a properly run archives can provide. Once one gets away from the academic world, the reality of services rendered to local (non-professional) historians, practicing architects and engineers, linguists, genealogists, economists, political scientists, statisticians, administrators, etc., can be demonstrated effectively."

A municipal preservation planner: ". . . public entities never know when or where litigation might arise. They never know what records they might need for what . . . social purpose. . . . the use of pedantic explanations is not relevant to those who have to balance budgets, social needs, and costs. . . . We have to prove to

the politician that we have a well thought out product, and sell it using techniques familiar to the business."

And finally, the director of a religious archives: "The profession desperately needs more discussion of how to make manuscript repositories valuable to the nonscholar, the nongenealogist. Most archival finding aids are so hard for nonspecialists to use. The whole mind set of archivists has to be changed to make them more open to the needs of the general public. . . . It does seem that archives are tough to kill. But that is not necessarily a good thing. Maybe they are tough to kill because the staff will meekly accept inadequate resources to do an overwhelming job."[27]

What these perceptive archivists are saying, in effect, is that archivists need to revise the way they think about themselves, their services, and the use of their materials by researchers. Archivists need a marketing strategy and orientation—to increase significant research use of their holdings and to make known the message of the significance of that use.[28]

A fifth approach that archivists need to develop is to *draw on the assistance of users in selected areas of archival work.* Archivists usually think of users only as a clientele to be served. In fact, researchers and researcher groups can be approached to assist archivists in critical areas of their work. One such area is appraisal. Too often, archivists appraise records in an intellectual vacuum and do not consult with the intended beneficiaries of appraisal work and decisions. In many cases, it would be helpful to seek the advice of researchers in the field before making a final decision on whether to

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[27]Elizabeth C. Stewart to Frank Mackaman, 4 January 1984; Anne R. Kenney to Mackaman, 14 December 1983; A.D. Ridge to Mackaman, 23 December 1983; Caroline Gallacci to Mackaman, 15 December 1983; and Robert L. Shuster to Mackaman, 10 January 1984, Records of the SAA Task Force on Archives and Society.

[28]For a perceptive elaboration of this theme, see Elsie Freeman, "Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support Through Results," *Midwestern Archivist* 10, no. 2 (1985): 89-97.

keep or discard records. In another article in this issue, Larry Hackman advocates going further and working toward the establishment of documentation strategies to ensure adequate documentation of issues, activities, functions, and subjects. Such strategies would be developed and implemented by ongoing mechanisms that would involve documentation creators and users, as well as archivists. Under this approach, users would become archivists' partners in carefully deciding what documentation should be retained and what could be discarded.[29]

A second area in which archivists and users should hold intensive discussions is the development of automated systems and data bases. As the computer increases archivists' ability to store and manipulate descriptive information on holdings, they need to ask key questions: Where and how do users encounter this information? How do they access it? What topical, subject, and geographical approaches do users pursue when accessing historical records? Do systems that make sense to archivists also make sense to users? If archivists do not consult with users, they may construct expensive and complex automated systems that frustrate the very people they should be designed to serve.

A third area in which users can and should work closely with archivists is advocacy for archival programs. Users should be leaders in campaigning for strong, adequately supported archival programs. Archivists need to cultivate researcher groups, to encourage them to play this role when appropriate, and to provide them with needed information on budgetary and program development needs.

Finally, *archivists need to consider merging reference, outreach, and public programs into a new, aggressive, proactive public service concept that is integrated into the total archival program.* Reference has been too narrowly conceptualized as a passive, reactive function isolated from the rest of the archival program. In many repositories, no one has total responsibility for coordinating all efforts relating to promotion and use of records. Archivists need to begin merging reference, outreach, and public programming efforts into a systematic management approach that stimulates program development and leads to increased research use. The limited work of the reference archivist would gradually be superseded by a new type of archival endeavor. "Public service" or "researcher service" archivists would have several key responsibilities, and their work would be carefully related to the rest of the archival program. The range of responsibilities might include the following:

- Answering reference inquiries and assisting researchers who visit the repository.
- Predetermining at least part of the reference traffic by continually reaching out to research groups that could benefit from using the records and openly advocating research use.
- Promptly reporting new accessions to journals and other sources that potential users are likely to see.
- Writing articles for non-archival professional journals and newsletters on the nature, content, and research potential of holdings, particularly underutilized holdings.
- Proposing sessions at professional meetings on archival resources and

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[29]See Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 12–47.

making presentations on the research potential of holdings.

- Holding conferences and workshops and producing publications and other materials on how to do research in archival material.
- Carefully tracking the use of records and monitoring and measuring the impact and significance of the research.
- Continuously reporting—through the media, exhibits, audiovisual shows, program reports, lectures, and elsewhere—on the significance and impact of research use of archives.
- Carefully monitoring and analyzing research use and utilizing the resulting information for planning and management decisions on appraisal of new records, reappraisal and deaccession-

ing of unused records, arrangement and description priorities, conservation needs, and microfilming and publication plans.

What is the *use* of archives? To adequately address this question, archivists need to reassess some long-held assumptions and develop some new approaches to their work. This article certainly raises more questions and issues than it settles; it is intended to initiate discussion of an important challenge to which the archival profession should turn its attention. If we do so, we may find answers to the question "What is the use of archives?" that will benefit our programs, our profession, our users, and our society.