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# Introduction to Archival Research Agendas

CHARLES G. PALM

THE PAPERS AND COMMENTARIES in this issue of the *American Archivist* were presented at the 1987 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in three linked sessions, each related to a planning goal of *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities*, the so-called "GAP Report."<sup>1</sup> Working with the SAA Committee on Goals and Priorities (CGAP), the 1987 Program Committee developed the sessions in order to focus attention on research needs in the three principal goal areas in the GAP report: (1) the identification and retention of records of enduring value, (2) the administration of archival programs, and (3) the availability and use of records.

The GAP report, which proposed goals and objectives for the archival profession, represented the first step in the planning

process. In order to continue this process, CGAP in 1987 began to develop a coordinated series of action agendas. To date, CGAP has convened five planning groups, each of which has produced an action agenda in a specific goal area, including appraisal and documentation strategies, automated records and techniques, educational potential of archives, institutional evaluation and standards, and management training. The action agendas list specific activities and projects, identify actors and necessary resources to undertake the activities, and schedule the activities in a logical sequence covering a specified period of years.<sup>2</sup>

While numerous activities and projects were readily apparent to the planning groups, it became clear to the CGAP planners that in many areas more research was needed before specific actions could be recommended. In these areas, a necessary pre-

<sup>1</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the Society of American Archivists Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: SAA, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>The action agendas of the CGAP planning groups will be available to the profession for review and comment by fall 1988.

Charles G. Palm is the current chair of the SAA Committee on Goals and Priorities and has been an active member of the archival profession since 1970. He has served on the Task Force on National Information Systems (1979-83) and the 1986 Program Committee, chaired the SAA Awards Committee (1983-85), and was president of the Society of California Archivists (1983-84). Since 1971, he has held various positions in the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, including archivist (1984-87), head librarian (1986-87), and associate director for library and archival operations (1987-present). The author wishes to thank the members of the Committee on Goals and Priorities for their assistance and comments.

condition for effective action is an examination of assumptions. The three papers undertake this examination. They identify areas in which research is needed; they pose new questions and restate old ones about archival theory and practice; and they offer methods for finding answers to those questions. In short, they take important new steps in the effort to set a research agenda for the profession.

In the first paper, Richard Cox and Helen Samuels present a research agenda for Goal I of the GAP report, the identification and retention of records of enduring value. They suggest five areas in which further study and research might lead to improved appraisal procedures and techniques. First, they propose a reexamination of the nature of the documentary record. Instead of appraising records of an organization in isolation, archivists could produce more valid appraisals by asking broader questions. How do records relate to published, visual, and artifactual sources? What do archivists need to know about an organization that is not documented by its records? What kinds of records should have been generated to document fully the role of this organization in society? Second, the authors suggest that archivists examine the interrelatedness of records. In an interrelated society, documenting multi-institutional and multi-national activities requires the examination of records of many institutions.

Thirdly, Cox and Samuels draw attention to automated records. Archivists need to study systems as well as output from the systems, and they must encourage system designers to provide ways of identifying and preserving the permanently valuable data produced by systems. Fourthly, they propose enhancements to the newly developed automated archival descriptive systems, such as the RLIN-AMC data base, which would permit the exchange of appraisal data among repositories. Finally, the authors propose a new round of assessments of state archival programs, focusing on the quality and adequacy of documentation.

In addition to targeting certain areas for future research, Cox and Samuels restate the new and much-discussed methodology for researching appraisal questions, the so-called "documentation strategy" model. For the authors, the model, which brings archivists together with records managers, records creators, and other experts in the appraisal process, offers new promise of advancing appraisal theory and techniques beyond their current boundaries.

In the second paper, Paul McCarthy discusses a research program supporting Goal II of the GAP report, the administration of archival records. He sets forth a research agenda for improving archival management as it relates to the individual archivist, the program or institution, and the profession.

Citing recent writings on corporate management, McCarthy suggests studies applying management concepts and models to archival administration. For example, the competency model developed by the American Management Association can be used to identify traits and skills that will produce effective archival managers at the entry, middle, and executive levels, and thus help archivists to develop educational programs that will address training needs at each of these levels.

Archivists might usefully draw upon the concept of corporate culture, in which a shared philosophy, human needs, values, and rituals are essential ingredients of the institutional environments of which archival programs are parts. McCarthy calls for an examination of the impact of these institutional environments on archival programs and a study of the relationship between institutional environments and accepted archival values and standards.

McCarthy proposes additional research projects, such as producing case studies of successful archival institutions and oral histories of archival administrators, testing new concepts that challenge traditional approaches to unsolved problems, evaluating the effectiveness of using contract services for archival tasks, finding ways to deliver

archival education directly to archival institutions, and experimenting with incentives to promote efficiency in the workplace.

On the broader professional level, McCarthy identifies several questions needing research attention. How do individuals enter the profession? What are the criteria by which they are selected for employment? What is the relationship between certification and employer requirements? Are there opportunities for developing mutually beneficial relationships between graduate research programs and established archival institutions? What is the proper structure for a system of institutional evaluation? Throughout his discussion, McCarthy challenges the profession "to be drawn by a vision, not driven by crises. To do less," he says, "is to invite the leadership and control of others."

In the final paper, Lawrence Dowler underscores the importance of research relating to the availability and use of records, Goal III of the GAP report. Research on use will help archivists promote use, set processing priorities, evaluate effectiveness of finding aids, and test appraisal criteria. More importantly, according to Dowler, research on use can lead to a redefinition of the profession, which in an age of revolutionary change in the recording and management of information may someday be necessary to preserve a functional role for archivists. Since use is fundamental to the value of records, it ultimately may determine the nature and future of the profession.

Dowler outlines four areas in which research is needed. First, archivists must learn more about users, both potential and actual. Identifying characteristics of users—such as what questions they ask, what materials they use, how intensively they use it, and who employs them—and recording this information in a central data base in a standardized way are the first steps to mak-

ing archival practices more responsive to user needs. Secondly, archivists should evaluate and improve current outreach methods. Thirdly, archivists need to understand the dynamics of the interaction between the reference archivist and the user. Dowler proposes enhancements to retrieval systems that will capture knowledge about records acquired by reference archivists and users, thus supplementing descriptive data provided by processing archivists. Finally, he challenges archivists to go beyond a preoccupation with the physical attributes of records and look at records in the context of the broader information marketplace. If archivists are to have a role to play in society, they must find out what information is and will be demanded by society, as other purveyors of information have done, and develop effective ways of providing it.

In a previous article in the *American Archivist*, Trudy Huskamp Peterson suggested that archival theory had entered a new phase, in which "the archivist's role shifted from accepting what is a record, to defining what should be in the record."<sup>3</sup> This "activist, interventionist" role is reflected in all three of the papers. What is also new and common to the three papers is an effort to look beyond the archival perspective for both ideas and definition. The Cox-Samuels "documentation strategy" model invites nonarchivists into the appraisal process in creative ways; McCarthy draws heavily on corporate management concepts; and Dowler urges use of social science methodology in archival research.

To the defiant energy of the "activist" has been added the moderating confidence to integrate archival theory with ideas from outside the profession and to place the archivist's role in the context of a broader information environment. This healthy development reveals a maturity in the archival profession that bodes well for the continuing process of improving and ex-

<sup>3</sup>Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "The National Archives and the Archival Theorist Revisited, 1954–1984," *American Archivist* (Spring 1986): 133.

tending archival theory and practice through research.

The three papers by themselves do not constitute a final, comprehensive research agenda, as some of the commentaries following the papers point out. As important as any final product is the process of thinking and planning. These papers contribute to the planning process by building on the work of the GAP report and providing di-

rection for future efforts. As a companion to *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the Society of American Archivists Task Force on Goals and Priorities*, this issue of the *American Archivist* will become a valuable tool for the Committee on Goals and Priorities, its planning groups, and others engaged in planning for the archival profession.



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