

## Commentary

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The development of a research agenda based on *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* can help the profession improve in many areas. By focusing on these goals and seeking responses to complex and often vexing problems, common solutions can help every archives and archivist.

Each of the three authors of the agenda papers was asked to respond to the objectives and activities under each goal and to suggest a research agenda. While workable in theory, the goals outlined by the task force make this a difficult, if not impossible, task for the person responsible for Goal II—"The Administration of Archival Programs to Ensure the Preservation of Records of Enduring Value."

Goals I and III reflect specific archival practices: collecting and appraising archival records and making records available to researchers. Goal II, however, deals with a number of specific archival tasks such as arrangement and description, archival education, individual and institutional standards, and conservation. These are tied together under a rubric of administration, and, indeed, some of the objectives, such as archival outreach, resource sharing, and improved management of archival programs, are managerial in nature.

The diversity of issues in Goal II, coupled with a lack of focus, reflect archivists' misunderstanding of the definition of management. Basic archival tasks have been intermingled with managerial tasks and responsibilities, causing personal energies to be focused on job-specific tasks with rela-

tively little thought toward professional or institutional goals, objectives, and activities.

If archivists are to adopt and use modern management techniques, they must first understand and recognize the value of this tool, a fact archivists are clearly beginning to realize. The formation of the management round table and the inclusion of management papers at Society of American Archivists' annual meetings give evidence of this. The persons attending the round table and management sessions, however, generally represent larger institutions who already understand the value of management or who must deal with administrative issues on a daily basis.

For a strong research program in managerial issues to begin, a majority of archivists must perceive this as an important issue which affects every archives, whether it has one part-time employee or a staff of nine hundred. Such issues as resource allocation, fund-raising, planning, and supervision affect every archivist. While the needs of each institution will differ, the allocation of scarce resources—a problem common to all archives—must be seen as a management problem that can be improved using specific knowledge and techniques.

A management information and education program for archivists is a first step in this process. Such a program must emphasize the practical aspects of management theory, and overcome the notion that this is an issue only affecting large archival repositories. Small repositories are the norm: 85 percent of all repositories have fewer

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than four professional staff; 68 percent have budgets less than \$175,000, and 42 percent have less than 5,000 cubic feet of records.<sup>1</sup> Archivists in small repositories have many competing demands, and unless management becomes a meaningful issue with real rewards, it will continue to be ignored by much of the archival profession. Such an education program can be considered a success when archivists look on management as being of equal value to arrangement and description, appraisal, and conservation.

The archival profession is composed of a large majority of very small institutions, and only a few programs which have more than ten employees. In most cases "the lone arranger" is also the "lone manager" facing managerial problems very different from those of the director or midlevel administrator of a large archives. For the profession to develop effective managers, it must differentiate between these groups, learn what management skills each requires, and then develop training packages to meet specific group needs.

A second step in developing managerial skills among archivists is to collect basic data concerning management activities among archivists. McCarthy suggests the development and collection of case studies as one approach to filling this information vacuum. Such studies are the backbone of most management training programs in business and could prove instructive in improving archival management skills. Such collections, however, should be geared to specific problems found in archives such as the passage of government regulations or bills, fund-raising and development for new archival buildings, planning and installation of new computer facilities, or the completion of a successful archival outreach program. Multiple studies collected on similar topics will more accurately por-

tray both positive and negative achievements of any given project.

While these studies will assist the individual archival administrator with his or her problems, they also provide the building blocks needed for ongoing research into advanced management training. Currently, archival education is still in its formative stages. While most educational programs spread their efforts over a broad spectrum of archival concerns, at least one should develop a specialized curriculum and research projects focusing on archival management issues. Such a program could be enhanced by an advanced summer workshop for practicing archivists, modeled on the Research Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives begun at the Bentley Library, but would focus on managerial training and research.

If there is to be worthwhile research on archives management, more detailed and accurate statistical information will be needed. With the 1985 census of archival institutions, the Society of American Archivists has made efforts in this direction; but this is only a beginning.<sup>2</sup> From comments on the census returns, archivists indicate that they keep only the barest minimum of information, and probably even less information is kept by those archives which failed to complete the survey.

If research on management is to be useful, the amount of information on archival activities must increase. Archivists need detailed costs on arrangement and description, reference services, and conservation if they are to revise their procedures to make their programs more effective. Research demands must be carefully studied to discover more about users and the demands they place on archival material. Few archivists have experience in this field, and a great deal can be learned from the ex-

<sup>1</sup>Paul Conway, "Perspectives on Archives Resources: The 1985 Census of Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 181-85.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 174-91.

perience of other professions and applied to specific archival issues.

McCarthy points out the need to develop a personal competency model for archival managers, perhaps the most important issue for archivists. Personal competency and the ability to tell the difference between efficiency and effectiveness is of paramount importance. Too often, archivists put their major program emphases on improving conservation or arrangement and description. While these may lead to a better archival program, they are not always appreciated or valued by the larger organization of which the archives is a part. Archivists must learn and understand what services are needed and supported by the parent agency and, in cases where archival needs are paramount, discover better ways of communicating this information to those who control the archives's budget.

The perceptions of archivists—both their own of themselves and those of others—have a major impact on professional success or failure.<sup>3</sup> For years archivists have sought to understand and overcome an image of themselves as “failed historians” or “sort-of librarians.” If archivists are to succeed, they need to know much more about themselves. Are they passive-reactive victims who are custodians of collections, or are they active leaders who provide an important service to an understanding public?

Archivists must know the background and credentials of those entering the profession. What percentage of new archivists are graduates of accredited archival training programs? Is this percentage increasing each year? What draws new archivists to the profession: prestige, mystique, handling original documents, or providing service? Do the skills needed to do archival work tend to exclude persons with leadership

qualities, or are the salaries too low to attract those who thrive on challenge and success? Only when archivists know who they are as a profession can programs be developed which will effect behavioral change. Given the low status and resources available for most archives, this should be one of the profession's highest priorities. Change will only come through leadership, and the means of eliciting and developing leadership can only come from management research.

Almost daily, the public is bombarded with messages that Americans live in a rapidly changing, information-driven society. As archivists, confronted daily with new types of transmission mediums and with increasingly voluminous records, this is not news but reality. The effect of this change has been a steep demand—and a corresponding spiraling increase in salaries—for computer programmers, records analysts, information scientists, and record managers. While the number of archival institutions and employment figures have increased somewhat, archives continues to be a fringe profession with fringe salaries to match.

While the future of the archival profession is not now in the balance, its past inability to take advantage of new techniques, such as records management, does not offer great hope for the future. Such failure reflects the inability of the archival profession to see an opportunity and seize it. In coming decades archivists will face similar situations in which they must make decisions that will either reshape and invigorate the profession or will lead to declining numbers and an indefinite future. Better management skills can make the difference in this decision process. Without an investment in research, however, archivists face an uncertain future.

<sup>3</sup>Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists 1984), 1–62.