

## Commentary

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Lawrence Dowler asks archivists to reorient their thinking to make *use* the measure and justification of archives. While some may take issue with his archival *weltanschauung*, the arguments Dowler presents in this article offer archivists the opportunity to look at their methods with fresh eyes. Ultimately, the strength of Dowler's position will depend upon how well it is developed in concrete terms. In his article, he offers only the barest outline. For instance, he exhorts archivists to adopt scientific methods and models in conducting archival research, and calls for a national study on the use and users of archives as the first priority. Yet the practical means for doing so remain undefined. Are there examples of how model theories can be applied in an archival context? Can the components of the proposed national study on use be defined?

Dowler promotes research in archival principles as a primary means toward defining the profession. While he emphasizes research in archival methodology, and cautions archivists to stop pretending they are misplaced historians, the benefits of historical research for archival practice should not be overlooked. This is particularly true for archivists who do research in their own collections. While developing a better understanding of the material in their care, they can discover new collecting leads, critically appraise their collections and methods of description, improve their reference abilities, and reveal potential new uses for the material.

Research can lead to self-definition, and for the archival profession, the emphasis

should be placed on applied research. Archivists must do research, but also must work to translate good theory into everyday practice. It seems that archivists have not successfully incorporated research projects into ongoing systematic programs; in most cases, follow-through has been minimal or short-lived. This suggests the need to track over time the impact of assessment grants, pilot projects, or archival models on actual practice. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission and other funding agencies are sensitive to this need and have begun to respond accordingly. The current preservation grant to the Society of American Archivists, for instance, provides for extensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the past SAA preservation program.

Dowler wants archivists to shift their attention from the physical record itself to the *uses* of records, making use the basis for defining archival practice. He cites use, including potential use, as a principal determinant of the value of records. While one may agree with his emphasis, a case can be made that all records are conceivably usable. The problem remains that tough decisions have to be made in appraising and committing resources to care for records. In other words, archivists must have a means for determining which records will be more usable than others. Where to begin? Dowler suggests a national study on use and users as the first priority. Certainly the user studies cited in his article whet the appetite. A national study would necessitate defining common standards for gathering statistics, but the study should not be

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limited to statistics generated in 1987 and beyond. Many repositories have kept detailed reference statistics for many years, including information on users' backgrounds, the collections they used, and the amount of staff time necessary to serve their needs. To get a good picture of use, archivists cannot neglect retrospective studies, especially if a sufficient number of institutions are willing to undertake such an analysis, and are given parameters under which to evaluate the statistics they already have. Of course, gathering statistics represents just the beginning. Their evaluation and application to archival work should always be kept in mind as standards are developed.

Information generated from such studies will enable archivists to know their users better. Early studies indicate that scholars are not the primary clientele. Despite this evidence, Dowler believes that archivists, for the most part, persist in thinking of scholars as the primary users. Perhaps, though, his perceptions are shaped by the "institutional persona" of the Houghton Library. Mine were probably shaped by working for a decade in the hinterlands of the Midwest, where it was clear that scholars represented a tiny minority of archival users. The problem may not be with the perception of who uses archival material, but with archivists' persistence in approaching all users in the same way.

Dowler identifies the importance of including nonusers in user studies. As he succinctly argues, without broadening the scope of inquiry, archivists' conclusions will be limited by the evidence of past use. The question becomes, how does one systematically study something with which one does not normally come into contact? One way to begin is to look at constituencies archivists should be serving but who are not currently using archival material, such

as employees of parent institutions or those who fund archives. For instance, state archives are meant to serve the interests of government as well as the citizens of the state. What units of government do not use the state archives but could benefit from information contained in state records? Under what conditions would they turn to the archives? How do government units that use the state archives determine their use? Do they use archives to serve constituent needs and to verify information or procedures, but never to formulate policy? One fruitful research project could involve legislative aides who could be asked to assess the usefulness and usability of archival information in drafting policies.

Conducting a use study among nonusers obviously incorporates an element of advocacy. For, as my mother the Episcopal priest is fond of saying in the hopes of converting me, church is not for the saints but for the sinners. Archivists do not need to convince those who already use archives; they need to reach those who do not but could benefit from such use. This leads to a consideration of the role of outreach in archival administration, a key component which should command a significant portion of resources. Dowler quite rightly identifies outreach as more than publicizing holdings. Archivists need programs that succeed in reaching the whole community of users—past, present, and future. This is an area for immediate research, and high priority should be given to outreach and its effect on use in the upcoming SAA archival fundamentals series manual on reference. Furthermore, the revised manual could be marketed as a package with Ann Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline's fine manual on public programs.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the success of outreach stems from knowing to whom to direct it, information that studies of nonusers should reveal. Part

<sup>1</sup>Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline, *Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1982).

of the answer lies in understanding how people get to archives in the first place. If, for example, the academic grapevine represents the most common path to archives for scholars, then archivists need to plug into that grapevine, as has been suggested, and be aggressive about doing so. The *Journal of American History* recently introduced a section entitled "Archives and Manuscripts" in which the editors plan to "focus on subjects of current scholarly interest and to provide critical essays that review archival and manuscript sources for those topics."<sup>2</sup> The reviewers are asked to emphasize newly opened or unreported sources and to describe collections in terms of size, scope, principal topics, relationship to other collections, accessibility, and the availability and utility of finding aids and other services. This section offers archivists a wonderful opportunity to take the mountain to Mohammed, that is, to address U.S. historians in their principal journal. Two guesses as to who wrote the first two essays—historians. One of them, entitled "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," fails to present some of the more promising archives for researching black women's history. Archivists must not be passive about outreach nor leave the task up to others.

Outreach programs should promote archival holdings in ways that actually increase use. Archivists continue to spend time and money producing guides, yet it appears that guides do not represent very effective outreach tools. The problem may not be with the guides per se, but with the methods of marketing them. An effective outreach program has a measurable impact. All efforts at outreach, including the production and distribution of guides, should incorporate an evaluation process which includes such considerations as whether the

program has led to increased use, an increase in the number of repeat users as opposed to one-time-only users, an improvement in the way researchers use the collections, and the relative costs.

In February 1986 Cornell University's Department of Manuscripts and University Archives co-sponsored with the Women's Studies Program and the History Department a conference entitled "Doing Women's History: Research Sources at Cornell." Designed to acquaint undergraduate students with the research process and the range of resources available at Cornell, the two-day conference also imparted to participants an idea of the excitement and enthusiasm historians have for their subject. Speakers included archivists, librarians, and historians. Participants received handouts on bibliographic tools for women's history and "instant" RLIN-generated guides to primary sources for women's history located in the Department of Manuscripts and the Labor Management Documentation Center. The conference succeeded in attracting nearly one hundred participants. Its intermediate effect could be measured by a significant increase in the number of researchers in the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives throughout the spring semester.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, reference librarians in both the graduate and undergraduate libraries noted an increase in the level of sophistication and in the number of questions they received regarding women's history sources. The conference's long-term impact resulted in a joint endowment to the Women's Studies Program and the library, the interest from which goes to support similar conferences.

Outreach can succeed in promoting use, and a repository should consider the impact of increased use on its program. At the Bancroft Library, an aggressive outreach

<sup>2</sup>"Archives and Manuscripts," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 232-34.

<sup>3</sup>The number of researchers in 1986 increased 13 percent over 1985; the greatest number of visits per month occurred in the three months following the conference.

program has resulted in doubling use over the past fifteen years—while the staff has remained the same. According to Irene Moran, head of reference, the library felt “hoisted on its own petard.” Research use ran above capacity and placed a tremendous strain on the staff, physical plant, and the collections. Last year was considered a good year because requests “dropped off by a few thousand.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, most archivists will never face such problems, but by evaluating outreach, they can respond to its effect on archival programs.

In August 1987 the *New York Times* began its coverage of Charles Merrill Mount, a portrait painter and art historian arrested in Boston on charges of interstate transportation of stolen property. Among items seized were Civil War documents from the National Archives and the Library of Congress. In the wake of Mount’s arrest, both institutions began “internal investigations to determine what may be missing from their collections.”<sup>5</sup> When an archivist discovers that items are missing, the logical concern is what else may be lost or stolen—followed by the sinking realization that he or she may never know. That archivists’ control over material in their care is not measured at the item level but in the aggregate must be kept in mind as archivists endeavor to put researchers in touch with materials that may help them. Imagine, for example, the reaction of the beginning researcher whose “simple” reference request results in the delivery of several cubic-foot boxes of materials to the reading room.

Elsie Freeman predicts that in the competition between archivists and other suppliers of information, archivists will lose out because historical information deliv-

ered in bulk is less attractive.<sup>6</sup> It may well prove true that as researchers’ information expectations rise, so will their discontent with using archives. This causes concern, basically because archivists will probably never be able to afford to deliver the same information other suppliers do. By improving archival delivery systems, archivists can tailor information to meet researchers’ needs and speed the box to their desk, but researchers ultimately will be left with that box of information to sift, distill, and evaluate. To promise otherwise, to entice researchers to the archival door under false pretenses, will only increase their level of dissatisfaction and place unrealistic demands on archival resources. Archivists must be able to assess quickly whether they have what researchers really need—and if not or if it is easier to retrieve elsewhere, be prepared to send the user off in the right direction.

Speed and precision in delivering information are not the only obstacles archives face in competing with other information sources. Dowler speculates that users “care very little about the form of the information they need to use or where they find it.”<sup>7</sup> It may be true that researchers would not care where they obtained the information to satisfy their questions, if access were equal; but it is not. Archives are harder to use than other sources and not just because of their bulk. A researcher cannot check material out and take it home, cannot order it through interlibrary loan, and must use it during fairly limited office hours. The most meaningful distinction between library and archives may not be physical form or “method and purpose of creation,” as Dowler has suggested, but access. Re-

<sup>4</sup>Telephone conversation with Irene Moran, 25 August 1987. Moran noted that the 1985–86 number of reference items retrieved was 115,000. In 1986–87 that figure dropped to 112,500.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Gamarekian, “Civil War Papers Found in Safe Box,” *New York Times*, 16 August 1987.

<sup>6</sup>Elsie T. Freeman, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User’s Point of View,” *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 112.

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence Dowler, “The Availability and Use of Records: A Research Agenda,” *American Archivist* 51 (Winter 1988):

searchers may perceive using archives as similar to using microforms and, because they do not like them, they use them only as a last resort. A direct correlation exists between the convenience of use and actual use. Until the real and psychological barriers to use of archival materials are removed, archives will not be integrated successfully into other forms of information. Research opportunities for improving access abound, such as developing "self-help" mechanisms for researchers, integrating archival holdings in local on-line public access catalogs, creating protocols for facilitating interlibrary loans of originals and microforms, or serving as "safe-houses" for the deposit and use of materials not under archival jurisdiction.

One final comment regarding a research agenda on use involves the bottom line—cost. Archivists can learn a lot about cost analysis from library colleagues who can quote down to the penny the amount it takes to process and shelve a book. In measuring the effectiveness of an outreach program, cost must be considered. If, for example, a workshop costs \$2,000 in staff time and real money, how many people must it reach to be considered effective? Dowler believes that archivists need to look at the operation of archival repositories in order to find ways to give higher priority to the uses of archives. He suggests that repositories conduct a systems analysis of the actual tasks performed in providing reference. Such an analysis might reveal some surprises. A year ago, all departments of the Cornell library system participated in such a study. The results for the Department of Manuscripts and University Archives revealed that ref-

erence work represented the single highest commitment of staff time; perhaps more significant was that fully one-third of all professional staff time was devoted to use, a figure double the amount of any other single function. Instead of coming in last, use represented the first operational priority as measured in resource allocation. This suggests that the resources may be there, but are not being effectively utilized.

Dowler's article clearly demonstrates that opportunities for research in promoting the availability and use of records of enduring value abound. The emphasis should be on applied research in which the means for incorporating the results into everyday practice is defined. If, as Dowler claims, the first research priority is to conduct a national study on use, the first step will be to define common standards for gathering statistics and to develop means for using those statistics already kept by many institutions around the country. A second area for research involves studying nonusers. The natural corollary of such studies will be to consider outreach programs as an integral part of archival administration. As outreach programs are planned, the means for evaluating both their effectiveness in promoting use and their effects on archival programs must be developed. The real costs in staff time and money should become part of the evaluation process. Finally, archivists are information suppliers but they differ from other information specialists in significant ways, particularly in terms of retrieval and access. They should be realistic about making promises that will be difficult or impossible to keep.