

Perspectives

Institutionalizing an Archives: Developing Historical Records Programs in Organizations

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Abstract: The primary purpose of an institutional archives is the management of the records of a parent organization. The archivist is likely to work in isolation from other archivists and, unlike a historical society or library-based employee, cannot expect preservation of historical records to be defined as an institutional priority. Thus the roles of the archivist and the archives must be well-defined if the archivist is to function as an advocate for the archives and an educator for the institution's staff. The author emphasizes the importance of developing long-term goals that go beyond ensuring the mere survival of the institution's records.

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CLEARLY DEFINED MANAGEMENT GOALS and planning are essential to any successful archival program. This is particularly true in institutional archives, where a carefully articulated self-definition can mean the difference between an active, healthy archives and a historical records program fighting for its survival. Program emphases necessarily will vary among archives in diverse institutional environments, but any setting requires the careful delineation of long-term and short-term objectives. Institutional archivists would be well-advised to place less emphasis on the distinctions between businesses, museums, hospitals, and religious institutions in seeking answers to common problems, because those problems often are shaped as much by issues such as the age, size, and program structure of the archives as by the type of institution that it serves.

The primary responsibility of an institutional archives is to collect, arrange, preserve, and facilitate the use of records of a parent organization. The authority for the archives, along with a majority of its funding, comes from the parent body. Although some materials in the archives may be donated from other sources, the core collection of records is that of the parent institution.¹ There are three issues facing institutional archivists that merit careful consideration: the special dynamics of managing an archives in an institution whose main purpose is not the operation of an archival program; the importance of self-definition; and the continuous education of administrators and staff regarding the importance and utility of archives.

¹There is no published definition of institutional archives. Ann Pederson, ed., *Keeping Archives* (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists Inc., 1987), 12, defines "natural" or "in-house" archives as an archives that collects only the records of its parent organization. My definition is built on Pederson's, although my focus is not on collecting but on the overall responsibilities of the archives. The term institutional archives encompasses archival collections in profit and non-profit businesses, religious organizations, hospitals, and museums.

The development of an archival program in an institution (profit or non-profit business, religious, hospital, museum, etc.), whose primary purpose is not maintaining an archives or even making sure that archival records are created, requires more study. The 1985 Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Census of Archival Institutions indicates that institutional archives are the fastest growing type of archives and that a large percentage of these have been established since 1975. This recent increase in institutional archives implies that an archivist in such a setting is likely the first or second individual to hold that position.² In most cases, the archivist embodies the archives for co-workers and can define the role freely. As Paul McCarthy has observed, most archivists have the unique freedom of self-definition, and this is either a major problem or a wonderful opportunity.³ Being the first archivist is a particularly powerful position, and full advantage should be taken of that power. Most of the institution's staff are unlikely to have met another records professional before the appointment of the first institutional archivist. That person is identified as a "typical" archivist, a fact to be viewed with both amusement and horror.

When working in a large institution, the first rule for the archivist is the Platonic aphorism, "Know Thyself"—to be able to answer the basic question, "Who is the I in Archives?"⁴ Self-education concerning

²Paul C. Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources: The 1985 Census of Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 174-191. The census asked the age of the parent institution and the age of the archives but did not ask respondents if they were the first archivist.

³Paul H. McCarthy, "Drawn By Our Vision Not Driven By Our Crises" (Paper delivered at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, New York City, 5 September 1987). Although McCarthy did not include this point in the published article derived from this paper (see note 9), he agrees with this statement.

⁴"Who is the 'I' in Archives," (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, n.d.).

the archivist's role is essential because in most organizations no one else knows what an archivist is or is supposed to be doing. The archivist must define the mission of the archives and his or her role in it, and then communicate the definition effectively to co-workers. Education is a continuous, cumulative, exhausting, and rewarding process. The archivist must become accustomed to prefacing most discussions with explanations of the pertinent archival functions. The role of the archives cannot be over-explained. All other achievements, indeed the strength of the entire program, hinge on instructing the institution's employees and managers about the potential role and benefits of an archives.

The attitude, role, and actions of the archivist must take into account the fact that no one else in the institution cares for the records, lobbies for them, and advocates their preservation. The answer to the question "if you don't, who will?" is "no one." The archivist must believe that the archives is entitled to a fair share of the money and should fight for it. The archivist must be aware that other equally deserving departments, such as those concerned with social justice, charity work, and research and development, compete with the archives for funding. If the archivist does not believe that the archives is equally deserving of funding and confidently assert the importance of the records, no one else will, and the records and the institution will lose.

Another basic survival tactic for institutional archives is recognizing that the first duty is to the institution. Archival control of the institution's core collection of records is the necessary prerequisite to the development of any strategy to identify and collect additional records in cooperation with other institutions. In this vein, Helen Samuels argues:

Archivists' legal obligations to their institutions are fulfilled by gathering the core collection. [Only] with the legal mission assured, archivists can examine

their collections as sources of information, seek ties with other institutions, and develop new strategies to build and manage collections. They will then be challenged to select material "within a much different environment, one in which each archives and library is not a self-contained entity, but a component of an undefined whole."⁵

A collecting policy expands on the role of the archives as represented in the mission statement and assists the archives in defining the program's relationship to the larger institution. This document provides another means of communicating information concerning the archives to supervisors, fellow employees, and budget committees.

According to the 1985 SAA census, the typical institutional archivist works in a two- or three-person shop.⁶ In this setting there can be a jarring contrast between the many hours spent "off" alone—processing, researching, surveying—and the very vocal and visible "on" position that must be taken to be effective when working with co-workers and a non-archivist supervisor. There never seems to be a happy medium. Another result of small staff size is the diversity of duties, which provides variety and experience in all facets of an archival program. When something must be accomplished, everyone pitches in. As archivist at the Archdiocese of Detroit, I could be found discussing future space requirements for the archives with bishops and senior officials at noon and stuffing envelopes for a mass mailing just a few hours later. The lines between administrative, managerial, technical, and secretarial duties are very thinly drawn.

Reporting relationships and the place-

⁵Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 114.

⁶Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources," 182. Conway calculated the median staff for religious (2.0), business (2.6), and museum (2.6) archives.

ment of the archives on the organizational chart affect its development and management. At the Archdiocese of Detroit, as in all diocesan archives, the placement of the archives is dictated by canon law.⁷ This leads to problems that may be paralleled in other institutions where the archives is placed under the person who lobbied the hardest for it, whether that is the chairman of the board or the director of public relations. In the Archdiocese of Detroit, the archivist reports to a different person than do the other department heads. This organizational separation led to a physical separation from other offices and also created an information gap that had to be overcome. Closing this gap was difficult but essential for the effective administration of the archival program. The archives was a dangling particle in need of integration into the whole. Institutional archivists must consider how, as in the Detroit example, the larger organizational structure and placement of the historical records program affects the management of the archives. This consideration affects both the management of the archives and its political survival in the institution. It also provides insights into how records were created and how they relate to each other.

Few administrative superiors are familiar with archives. Though likely not overtly hostile to archives, they have not been trained to think archivally or to consider the archives functions within their institutions. Institutional archivists must develop better strategies for transforming these archivally-neutral administrators into archivally-aware supervisors. Ideally, supervisors will become "archival" in their thinking and consult the archives as a matter of course, but it can take years to build this relationship. In most institutions, decisions and administrative precedents are based

primarily on memories of past events or informal oral histories, rather than on documented fact. Archivists must challenge these assumptions—which is not easy or popular to do—and cajole planners and decision makers to use the primary sources.⁸

Increasing awareness of the archives is essential. Educating one's supervisor is a logical first step and may be the key to the success of the archival program. This is done largely through formal, periodic meetings between the archivist and the manager. Bringing a supervisor into the archives facility is a valuable initial activity. In many cases the manager may not see the need, but there are things that occur in the archives about which the administrator should be aware.

There are many activities an archivist can perform to help the supervising administrator become more "archival" in his or her thinking. Policies and procedures manuals should be shared with the supervisor and kept current. Likewise, copies of all finding aids and registers should be made available to the administrator. In this way supervisors can see what exists in the archives and can then better determine the amount of work being accomplished. Supervisors can also be assisted in more subtle ways. If a letter or memorandum concerning the archives or an archives-related issue is required (perhaps announcing new archival policies) that would be more effective with the administrator's signature or that of another highly placed official, the archivist can draft a sample letter that reflects archival thinking. The archivist should also be alert to current events and issues with which the administration is dealing and

⁷*Code of Canon Law* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), Canon 482.

⁸Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 254-265 passim. The entire work analyzes how history has been used (or abused) in the decision-making process and presents valuable insights for those interested in the issue of archives and society.

should be creative in demonstrating how the archives can be used in various situations.

A carefully composed advisory committee can provide the archivist with an important source of support, and can aid in defining, managing, and publicizing archival program goals and needs. Ideally, an advisory committee includes a broad mixture of people who know and can influence the parent institution and who support the archival program. It is also strengthened by the inclusion of an outside archivist and a historian. The advisory committee helps to inform the archivist's supervisor and the parent institution of the value of the archives. If the archivist has tried unsuccessfully to communicate certain archival concepts or needs to an administrator, a carefully orchestrated meeting of the advisory committee can help to achieve this end. The archivist must establish him or herself as the chief director and manager of the archives and not relinquish this authority to the non-archival administrator, the advisory committee, or others.

A successful institutional archival program depends on the ability of the archivist to perform self-evaluations and to plan his or her own professional development because the archivist's supervisor is in no position to provide this assessment.⁹ Non-archival managers evaluate archivists on demeanor, attitude, and perhaps speed in responding to their questions. At the Archdiocese of Detroit, the evaluation form was very general; it was found inadequate for the evaluation of other specialized office heads as well. This is consistent with the findings of the SAA-sponsored survey of administrative superiors' image of archivists: that they are perceived as nice, easy to get along with, organized, well-edu-

cated, but ultimately undeserving of any greater support.¹⁰

In addition to the admonition to "know thyself," the archivist must develop well-defined goals and objectives. If action plans are not drafted, two problems arise. First, the archives can all too easily be consumed by the administrative superior's priorities. In such cases, the archivist can become the institutional historian or museum curator. Second, an undirected archivist can be overwhelmed by the daily archival demands, reminiscent of an exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Alice: "Which way ought I to walk from here?"

Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

Alice: "I don't much care where."

Cheshire Cat: "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk."

Alice: "As long as I get somewhere."

Cheshire Cat: "Oh, you're sure to do that if you only walk long enough."¹¹

Archives do matter, and although fighting the daily fires is sometimes unavoidable, approaching the management of the archival program with more long-range objectives and clearer direction is essential to the archives' maintenance and preservation.¹² At the Archdiocese of Detroit, the yearly budgetary process required the formal articulation and reevaluation of goals, thus providing much insight into program development and into the strengths and weaknesses of its management. Budget documents also provided an avenue for the advancement and communication of the activities, strengths, and needs of the pro-

¹⁰Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984), 35.

¹¹Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (New York: Heritage Press, 1941), 85.

¹²Gregory S. Hunter, "Filling the Gap: Planning on the Local and Individual Levels," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 114.

⁹Paul H. McCarthy, "The Management of Archives: A Research Agenda," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter and Spring 1988): 58.

gram. The budget review process brought together senior archdiocesan administrators, fellow office heads, clergy, religious, and prominent lay people and provided a forum in which to demonstrate the positive aspects and the unrealized potential of the archival program.

Another tool for archival development is the annual report, which can be submitted solely to a supervisor or be distributed widely. In the Archdiocese, the archives annual report was circulated to the Vicar-General, other department heads, and the Archbishop in addition to the Secretary to the Archbishop (Chancellor), to whom the archivist reports. Two interesting things resulted from the circulation of one annual report. First, the Moderator of the Curia (the Vicar-General) informed the archivist of his pleasure with the report and praised the degree of accountability, stating that other departments should be more accountable. His assessment of accountability was fairly ironic because the archives is located three floors below the supervisor and in another building from the Moderator's office, a physical distance that mirrored the intellectual separation. The Secretary and the Vicar-General made only brief visits to the Archives during the entire year.

Second, the annual report noted that the environmental control unit had been malfunctioning and that it was difficult to maintain stable temperature and humidity in the vault, where the most precious records are kept. After the report was distributed, the Archbishop himself inquired about the problem, and indicated that he wanted it solved. It was only with his memorandum that the archives was able to demonstrate the seriousness of the problem, and

convince administrators of the necessity of purchasing a new environmental control unit. This outcome illustrates the importance of developing legitimate means of communication and ties throughout the organization. It also cautions against fully relying on one person, such as the immediate supervisor, to lobby for the archival program. The manager, even if sympathetic to the archives, has many other priorities, concerns, and responsibilities. While it is politically unwise to go over a supervisor's head, mechanisms such as an advisory committee or an annual report can be established for future use to give archival concerns a broader airing.

Institutions of various kinds share many characteristics including hierarchical chains of command, power struggles, limited resources, and endless competition for existing funds. The archivists in these institutions have parallel interests and face similar obstacles to program development. Solutions to some of these problems can come from archivists in other types of institutions and from other specialized professionals within their organizations such as in-house architects, personnel administrators, and librarians who encounter similar misunderstanding of their roles within the institution. In this way, archivists may discover creative strategies to articulate their roles and perform their duties more effectively. Although it is not easy, working in an institutional setting can strengthen one's sense of what it is to be an archivist. The archivist is constantly challenged to define his or her role in the institution, to explain the benefits and potential of an archival program, and to define basic archival concepts in terms that everyone can understand.