Perspective

The Current State of Academic Archives: A Procrustean Bed for Archival Principles?

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Abstract: Archives of colleges and universities have evolved in response to a number of pressures and forces, most of which are beyond their control: the character, age, and mission of the parent institution; the administrative location of the archives; the place of the archivist in the institutional hierarchy; the research, teaching, and programmatic interests of faculty and administrators; the educational and subject interests of the archivist; and archival theory and principles. Academic archivists face the challenge of trying simultaneously to meet professional program standards, maintain the primacy of their core mission, and accommodate other opportunities and demands, all of this within the limits of available resources. The resolution of these tensions may come less from the development of external standards than from each archivist's ability to seize control of the forces and direct them to the good of the program.

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A REVIEW OF THE current state of archives in American colleges and universities demonstrates that the archivist fills a bewildering number of roles, including records custodian, advisor on administrative information practices, public relations resource, educator, trivia guide, exhibitor, and institutional memory. Unfortunately, this diversity contributes to a lack of clarity about what a college and university archives should be. By the very nature of the terms, one would expect an "academic archives" to be a repository whose primary mission is to document the heritage of a college or university.[1] Presumably, the academic archivist's time would be devoted predominantly to the care and servicing of campus institutional records, and all other activities would be peripheral. In practice, however, most archives adopt a number of other functions, so that it often seems that the most characteristic feature of academic archives is their extra-institutional and extra-archival responsibilities.

These conditions render assessment of the current state of academic archives particularly difficult. The usual methods of describing conditions in various institutions—surveys, site visits, consultations and review of the archives' own reports or promotional brochures—only reinforce the initial impression that there is little practical uniformity or coherence in the concept of academic archives.[2] Another approach—to outline a composite model of the typical academic archives—is equally misleading because it ignores the local conditions that have determined how each archives has evolved and how we have come, collectively, to our present state.

To many, the diversity inherent in academic archives offers a sure sign of hopeless disorder resulting from a lack of professional standards for the obviously underdeveloped area of archival practice. I will argue, instead, that within the disorder, one can actually find a set of complex laws. From this perspective, academic archives may fit the now-accepted scientific concept of "chaos," by which natural phenomena previously seen as unordered in reality are parts of larger, though chaotic, systems.[3] The first step to understanding the current state of academic archives and to accepting their "chaos" as a system is to recognize that many of the factors influencing the development of archival programs are outside the province of archival measurements, goals, standards, and textbooks. These factors occur differently in each archives; but collectively they contribute to an underlying distinctive character for college and university archives.[4]

Forces that Shape Academic Archives

Academic archives have not developed within a vacuum. The programs we see today are more than the mere products of

[1] *Guidelines for College and University Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979). While this superb statement of the essence of college and university archives does not explicitly define "academic archives," it clearly reveals the primacy of the management of institutional records to the mission of academic archives.

[2] Such a description might be based on a survey like that done by Nicholas C. Burckel and J. Frank Cook, "A Profile of College and University Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 45 (1982): 410-28; or it might draw data from the more recent Paul Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources: The 1985 Census of Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 174-191. A definitive treatment of the current state of college and university archives also would benefit from direct observation of several repositories through a series of site visits such as those conducted by Ernst Posner for his classic treatment of state archives, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

[3] For an introduction to chaos see: James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

[4] Two caveats are in order. First, even though these characteristics reflect the real world of academic archives, few programs exhibit all of them. Second, the following description of the pressures shaping archival programs should not be seen as a critique of any particular academic archives.

each archivist's efforts to apply the corpus of archival knowledge to his or her institution's documentary heritage. Rather, college and university archives have evolved under a number of pressures and forces. Six basic forces have shaped academic archives: the character, age, and mission of the parent institution; the administrative location of the archives; the place of the archivist in the institutional hierarchy; the research, teaching, and programmatic interests of faculty and administrators; the educational and subject interests of the archivist; and archival theory and principles. Given the strength and pervasiveness of these pressures, academic archivists, not surprisingly, may feel that their programs have been placed on the tortuous bed of Procrustes. This Greek mythological villain amputated or stretched all of his guests so they would neatly, but morbidly, fit his bed. Similarly, an academic archives can become a victim of the forces amidst which it operates, and thereby lose the fundamental shape of a true academic archives despite the archivist's most diligent efforts.

Nature of the institution. The first of the conditions placing the archivist on a Procrustean bed is the character, age, and mission of the parent institution. These factors exert a great influence on what the archives contains, who its users will be, and the type of activities the archivist will emphasize. For example, a two-year community college has a distinctly different mission than a four-year liberal arts college. A large public or private university with extensive graduate and research programs will have yet another character. Thus, archival work in the community college may emphasize records management and administrative information retrieval, while the work of the archives at an older, traditional liberal arts college may be more biographical and celebratory of alumni. Archivists in public institutions are likely to enjoy greater emphasis on openness of records than is possible at some private institutions.

The stature of the institution and the age of its programs will also influence the value of its records to outside users. For example, the student affairs case files at the mythical Central Illinois State University in Chebanse may have little research value, while the same kind of record at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton may have sufficient importance to justify archival retention.

An urban university with a commuter population will have different student and faculty interests than a school situated in a rural "college town." In the former, the archives can become an outreach vehicle to the urban community via manuscripts collecting and historical exhibits. In the latter, the predominance of the institution in the community may be so great that the academic archives may become the de facto historical society for the area. Religiously affiliated colleges and universities may add to, or subtract from, the archives' collecting scope based on the presence of programs for the denomination's own records.

Administrative location of the archives. A second major force shaping the archives is its administrative location within the institution. This, too, influences what the archivist does, what the program's goals are, and even who can be the archivist. For proof, one need look only at the programmatic results of the two major alternatives for administrative location: the university administration and the university library.

An archives that reports to the president's or alumni office is likely to emphasize records management, information retrieval to assist current operations, public relations, and alumni and fund-raising activities. Elements with lower priority might include research access by undergraduates, the general public, or scholars from other institutions; extra staffing for evening and weekend hours; preservation; and development of manuscript collections.

If located in the university library, the archives may be conjoined with other "special collections" units, such as rare

books and manuscripts. In the process, important administrative activities such as records management or information retrieval are likely to earn the archivist little credit with library superiors. In a library setting, general reference desk duties and other non-archival responsibilities can require the archivist to take time away from essential elements of archival work such as the inventory and appraisal of office records or regular records microfilming. Productivity and accomplishments may be measured in library terms, emphasizing the use of materials but slighting time spent on important activities necessary for preservation or management of the university's administrative records.

Libraries are also well known for strongly influencing the choice of the archivist. In fact, a key element in academic archivists' discussion of education and certification programs in recent years has been the pervasive influence of the master of library science degree.[5] By the same token, location in the administration may lead to other inappropriate personnel being hired, such as an administrator or professor who has been an underachiever elsewhere in the institution.

Level of the archivist in the hierarchy. A third force, one that is often as important as the administrative location of the archives, is the level of the archivist in the hierarchy of the unit to which the repository is assigned. A review of several American academic archives suggests that archivists' ability to accomplish key program goals may be more dependent on their place in the hierarchy than on their administrative location.

For example, it can be difficult to obtain policy support for records scheduling and disposition activities if the archives is a subordinate unit in a special collections department, rather than a free-standing unit on a par with other major library units. By the same token, an archives that is a subordinate unit in the university's alumni office will find it more difficult to solicit manuscripts and private papers than if it were on the same level as other important administrative units, such as the campus public information office. Most importantly, the level in the administrative hierarchy will determine the number of programs with which the archives must compete for both resources and the attention of institutional policy-makers.

Interests of faculty and administrators. A fourth key influence shaping academic archives is the research, teaching, and personal interests of faculty members and campus administrators. Collectively the faculty and administrators may show little interest in the archives. On each campus, however, there are individual professors or administrators who regularly lobby the archivist to pursue this or that program activity dear to their hearts. These individual interests, which have had a considerable cumulative impact on American academic archives, are especially apparent in faculty efforts to collect materials for the archives and to develop programs for using documents in their particular subject areas. In many circumstances, a faculty member's interest in the archives may be related directly to how many outside manuscript collections the archives can acquire in his or her area of interest. Faculty influence thus contributes to the preservation and use of documents, but it often diverts crucial attention from the institutional records program that one would expect to predominate in academic archives. In too many cases, only a few faculty members are interested in studies of their own institution or in pursuing broader topics through institutional records.

[5] "Certification of Archivists," *Academic Archivist* [Newsletter of the SAA College and University Archives Section] 4 (May 1986): 3-9; Edward C. Oetting, "Who Are these People and Why Can't We Call them Librarians?" *Library Administration and Management* 3 (1989): 135-38.

Faculty are not the only source of these pressures. The disciplinary, publicity, and fund-raising interests of campus administrators may force programmatic activities on the archives that do not conform to its priorities. Consequently, the archives may have to divert staff and space resources from, for example, student services files of the 1960s or faculty papers from the anthropology department in order to collect and process early twentieth-century business, farm, or educational records. The latter, of course, might have great potential for research use, and they might not be preserved without the initiative of the faculty member or administrator. However, the net result is that important attention and resources are taken away from what should be the archives' primary goal—documenting the parent institution.

Faculty and staff interests also can distort the archival program in other ways. Underemployed faculty who suddenly decide that oral history or a new photo history of the campus is just what the university needs are likely to place heavy service demands on the archives. Nothing is wrong with more use, but often these projects mean that the archives must devote major portions of its reference service to a range of activities it would not choose as its priority. Worse yet, these ventures often are poorly planned without understanding the institution's history and without involving the archives in the early stages to ensure systematic treatment based on the accumulated documentary record.

Interests of the archivist. A fifth major force—the extra-archival interests and educational background of the archivist—will influence the priorities that are established for staff time, the kinds of materials acquired, and the level of service offered. For example, the presence in finding aids of elaborate narrative analyses reflects the heavy influence of historical training on the archival profession. The interest in historical research also is apparent in the emphasis on manuscript collecting, which is so common in college and university archives. In addition, many archivists have pursued other activities in order to maintain their sanity. There are examples of archivists whose personal involvement in local history, automation, photography, genealogy, or preservation of historic buildings has led to an emphasis on these elements in several archival programs.

There may be profound effects on the archival program if an archivist has teaching responsibilities. A substantial amount of staff time may be devoted to instruction and meeting with students. This takes time away from the archives, but also can bring increased use and, better yet, cheap labor for processing, oral history, or research. Similarly, archivists who were trained for a teaching career may develop extensive outreach programs aimed at undergraduates.

The archivist's participation in professional association activities also can stretch the program's resources. One may argue that professional activity benefits the program by supplying a broader knowledge of archival practice and an opportunity to relate individual experience to the ongoing development of archival practice. Nevertheless, committee service, elected office, and conference attendance take valuable time away from the archival program.

Archival theory. The sixth force is the corpus of archival theory and writings. While it is of a different dimension, it is very important nonetheless. In the ideal world—the one we learned about in "archives school"—this force should give primary shape to our programs. Each action in the archives—whether appraising a new collection, preparing a finding aid, or serving a researcher—should follow directly from the principles and procedures recommended by the state-of-the art texts in these areas. In this ideal world, archivists would follow Maynard Brichford for appraisal, David Gracy for description, and Sue Hol-

bert for use. If one did not agree with these writers, archival literature is broad enough to provide other sources of theory, such as F. Gerald Ham or Frank Boles for appraisal, and Richard Berner or Richard Lytle for description. Furthermore, to aid in the practical application of principles developed in the archival literature, academic archivists can turn to the 1979 SAA *Guidelines for College and University Archives* which describe the core elements required for program operations.

Thus, the professional literature and guidelines can function as standards against which archival practice should be measured, and they thereby operate as a force influencing the shape of an academic archives program. To a committed professional archivist, this would seem to be an unmitigated benefit. After all, should not every archives be pushed to achieve the highest possible standards? In many circumstances, however, the goals and standards found in the literature and professional pronouncements are so demanding that their attainment is unrealistic. As important as archival theory and standards are, they represent a source of pressure on the archivist that must be managed, just as the other five forces are.

While some may find heretical the suggestion that archival theory and standards could have detrimental effects on an archives, academic archives do not, and should not, operate solely within the spectrum of archival theory and principles. Instead, these principles are applied in an environment filled with diverse pressures. State-of-the-art archival work, the basis for many statistical measurements, is beyond the resources of most archives for all but a few areas of work, and the recent enthusiasm for defining archival program standards and goals should be regarded cautiously. This trend may reveal more about the state of the profession's thinking than about the possibilities that can be achieved in practice. Academic archivists should not shun standards, goals, and priorities, of course, but these should not become the sole measurements by which the quality of programs are assessed. The success of a program should be judged by how well the archivist implements the basic principles within the constraints of competing pressures for the few resources available.

A good example is found in the introduction of the MARC Archives and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format as a new standard of description. This technique draws from the cumulative body of archival theory and principles and provides a sophisticated tool for description of holdings. Most academic archivists, however, will be hard-pressed to implement the format throughout their repositories unless several other program areas are neglected. Thus, if implementation of the MARC AMC format were used as a criterion by which to define an archives' success, we would be ignoring many complex circumstances determining what an archives can do with its limited resources. If the academic archivist attempts to manage a program solely in regard to archival theories and standards, the results can be counter-productive. Soon the program may become a sequence of fragmented attempts to meet one high standard after another, while never meeting the basic goals of good program stewardship.

Importance of Resources

Even after the importance of these six forces in determining the current state of academic archives is acknowledged, a more fundamental reality remains: it is that the availability of resources determines the archivist's ability to respond to these diverse pressures and to shape the program. Resources include not only the program's budget and number of staff, but also the level of classification of the staff, equipment, supplies, availability of support services, and policy support of the archives' role in documenting the institution. These

resources establish the confines within which the archives can respond to the pressures it faces. From this perspective, it seems clear that the current state of academic archives is predominantly the result of local conditions that may be very much beyond the control of the archivist.

The condition of academic archives is unlikely to change radically because there is little prospect of major infusions of new resources. There may be improvements here and there, but given the tightness of funding for public and private education in the 1980s, it is unlikely that there can be an expansion of programs such as that witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s. Major changes will have to come more slowly, as a result of each archivist's ability to use available resources to cope with the existing pressures. In this sense, the future may not be much different than the immediate past—it can improve only through the efforts of individual archivists to manage their programs amidst the many competing forces they face. In other words, the future of academic archives depends on a realistic assessment of the constraints of the present.

The Archivist's Responsibility to Control the Forces

The archivist faces a struggle to respond to forces like those outlined above while also fulfilling the core mission of an academic archives—preservation and accessibility of the documentary record of the parent college or university. Not only can the effort to accommodate multiple outside pressures with chronically limited resources impair core archival goals, but an archives also must adopt different roles for each interest group. There is nothing wrong with developing multiple roles—it has brought many benefits to archivists, broadening our constituency, expanding the scope of service to our employers and the research community, and promoting historical investigation and appreciation for the past. Amidst these competing pressures, academic archivists must not lose sight of their core mission. Thus, these forces can be seen as a Procrustean bed for archival principles, i.e., a bed on which the central function and purpose of an academic archives—documentation of the parent institution—may be stretched or amputated beyond all recognition as the archivist's time and available resources are utilized to satisfy all of the prevailing forces.

A pragmatist might argue that, because many of the forces pushing and pulling our programs are institutionally based, it is our responsibility as employees to honor the institution's interests. There is merit in this perspective, and archivists should acknowledge the problem of being driven only by externally developed standards and goals, whether they come from the Society of American Archivists, the American Library Association, the Organization of American Historians, or the SAA College and University Archives Section. But, in being overly pliant and responsive to local pressures, the archivist can weaken the program's essential archival goals. This, in turn, will undermine efforts to convince the institution of the value of the archival program and the need to provide major support.

In directing their programs, one of the most important challenges faced by current academic archivists is to recognize and understand the forces that inevitably bear down on the program. Each archivist should consider preparing an inventory of local and external forces that appear to be driving his or her program. The next step is to learn how to manipulate these forces so that a balance is maintained between archival and extra-archival activities. The archivist should become like the hero Theseus, who destroyed Procrustes by placing the brigand on his own torturous bed. That is, the archivist should seize control of all the constituent interests and place them on a bed of archival principles. Then, based on the goals the archivist has established for the

institution's historical records program, the archivist can stretch or amputate all the interests and activities that do not fit the archival bed that he or she has created. For example, the archivist might seize control of faculty interest in manuscript collecting by using them as "field agents" for the archives, but also bring them into closer touch with archival goals by appointing them to an archives advisory committee.

Academic archivists must resist the influences that divert us from the basic institutional role that should be the core of our work. Nevertheless, given that all our programs must exist within a setting over which we have relatively little control, we should recognize that external forces also represent avenues for program development if they can be brought under the archivist's control. In the best of circumstances, we should begin our response to the demands on our programs by assessing how much each contributes to, or detracts from, our basic archival goals. Compromises are inevitable, but we should make them with more awareness. The challenge is to focus as much as possible on our institution's documentary heritage while also doing good work for historical records and research in general. In this context, the best academic archives may not be those with all the resources to meet the textbook standards. More likely, they will be managed by archivists who know how to make compromises and concessions and still maintain balanced programs.