Perspective

SCOTT CLINE, editor

Curriculum Development in Archival Education: A Proposal

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Abstract: Professional archival education has matured considerably during the past decade, but much remains to be done. Archival education remains trapped in a workshop mentality that treats topics summarily, fails to integrate them, and emphasizes practical at the expense of theoretical considerations. Archival educators need to promote the development of courses that have genuine intellectual substance. The author suggests seven curriculum areas that archival education should cover and discusses how courses could be developed in these areas.

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ON THE WHOLE, THE 1980s were reasonably good years for archival education. At professional meetings and in the archival literature, increased attention was paid to questions of preparing a new generation of archivists for their work. Some of the particularly pointless disputes of the past—most notably the history vs. library science debate over the proper administrative setting for archival education—were muted. A few new university-based programs offering graduate archival education came into existence, while others, including some that had been active for many years, closed up shop. Apart from the advantages or disadvantages of that trend in particular cases, a general consolidation of archival education seemed to be underway.

What is more, both the form and the content of professional education took on new definition. In 1977, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) for the first time issued a set of "Guidelines for a Graduate Minor or Concentration in Archives." This brief document outlined the subjects that ought to be covered by courses attempting to educate students before they became archivists. In 1988, the guidelines were significantly expanded, providing much more detailed guidance on course content and method. Three courses—one at the introductory level, followed by two others that offered extended "hands-on" experience—emerged as a de facto standard for an archival education program. Even more promising, a growing number of full-time archival educators was appointed to university faculties. Freed from the responsibility of managing archival collections of their own while also teaching "on the side," these educators represented a more serious commitment to archival education on the part of their schools than had previously been common. There was near unanimity of opinion that having such "archival theologians" as a supplement to the ranks of "archival parish priests" was a good thing. Finally, the SAA also established and maintained a distinct education office. Though the successive incumbents of this office were pulled in many different directions, taking on duties beyond those peculiarly relating to education, they were able to make important progress. An impressive array of workshops on a whole range of subjects was assembled; hundreds of archivists around the country took advantage of these educational opportunities.[1]

Unfortunately, every silver lining has its cloud. A great many courses purported to offer archival education in a great many universities, but these courses looked good only if one did not look at them too carefully. In 1988, Timothy Ericson (then the SAA education officer) surveyed the archival curriculum landscape and drew some disturbing conclusions. There were 250 graduate level courses reported to the SAA Education Directory, but 61 of them (almost one-quarter) offered what he called "education that might benefit an archivist rather than archival education" as such. These included courses in fields like oral history, public history, and historic building preservation. Of the 189 courses remaining, 29 were internships and practica, and another 35 were seminars or independent studies. More than half the balance were basic survey courses, designed to introduce students in a single semester to all aspects of archival work. That left just 59 courses to treat particular aspects of archival theory and practice in any detail, and more than half of those were in one of only two areas: preservation or records management. The gaps in professional education were painfully wide. Ericson could find only

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[1]"Guidelines for a Graduate Minor or Concentration in Archival Education," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 105-108; "Society of American Archivists Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs," ibid. 51 (1988): 380-89. See also Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," ibid. 44 (1981): 40-46, and Paul Conway, "Archival Education and the Need for Full-time Faculty," ibid. 51 (1988): 254-65.

six courses that dealt specifically with the archival implications of automation, for example. The advancement of archival education was more apparent than real.[2]

Why, despite all the progress, has there been such little progress? My own view is that archival education has for too long been trapped in a workshop mentality. Most members of the older generation of archivists, including those who now attempt to teach archives to a newer generation of professionals, received what little formal training they have in workshops. These brief courses have been scattered unsystematically at levels that are both introductory and particular. (I use this latter term to denote workshops that focus on one aspect of archival work, such as appraisal, and I prefer it to the designation "advanced" for such offerings.) Accordingly, when archival educators think of handing on what they know about their profession, they tend to visualize the transmission as taking more or less the same form.

This workshop mentality saddles archival education with several disadvantages. First, it accustoms both educators and students to thinking about their discipline in summary, overview fashion. Because time is inevitably limited in workshops, we are used to proceeding very quickly through all aspects of archival work. If students must learn something about provenance, appraisal, accessioning, arrangement, description, reference, access, automation, preservation, ethics, and other subjects besides, all in a matter of two or three days— or even in two weeks—the treatment of any of those subjects will obviously be superficial. Superficiality is no reason not to try, of course; for many archivists, especially those sometimes called "archivists by ap-

pointment" (that is, those suddenly designated as their organization's archivist without the benefit of previous training or even interest), superficial education is probably better than none at all. Still, the intellectual outlook cultivated in workshops has an enduring effect, and we too often think that semester-length archival courses are simply long workshops. When we try to stretch the material usually covered in three days into a fourteen-week academic term, the fit is not always snug.

The workshop mentality also trains us to break archival subject matter into discreet blocks: here's the discussion of appraisal; there's the discussion of arrangement and description; and so on. The interconnections among archival tasks are too frequently obscured. Should we be talking about constructing finding aids, for example, without simultaneously talking about the reference process that will help archival researchers use those finding aids? In the same way, this fragmented treatment leads to a poor integration of the professional literature into archival coursework. The various archival tasks are separated from one another, and the literature—particularly any portion of it that is the least bit theoretical—is also kept separate, often serving as a kind of window-dressing. Too often, course readings are seen as distinct from course content and practical experience. Regardless of what we think of the quality of the professional literature (my own opinion is that it has been steadily improving in the last decade), we have not succeeded in integrating it into an overall educational plan or in determining what role it should play in the ongoing development of archivists. Once again, we are victimized by the limited time and circumstances of the workshop model; readings are almost always incidental in a workshop setting. They are assigned and read (if indeed they are) far in advance and do little more than set the mood for the workshop, seldom con-

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[2]Timothy L. Ericson, "Professional Associations and Archival Education: A Different Role or a Different Theater?" *American Archivist* 51 (1988): 298-311.

necting to what actually takes place there. Ignoring the professional literature is a sloppy intellectual habit that stays with us.

Above all, the workshop mentality leaves us with an irresistible disposition toward practicality. In archival education, we have striven principally to communicate to students how to *do* it when it comes to archives. We have been less interested in teaching students to think like archivists than we have in getting them to act like archivists. Workshops are designed to be practical, of course, and a pedagogical approach that passes quickly through theoretical considerations to hands-on experience or the examination of case studies is perfectly suitable in that setting. To think that this is the only way to approach archival education is, however, a serious error. The result has often been a concentration on processing collections and preparing finding aids as the only "real"—or perhaps the most real—archival activity. Gaining such knowledge and abilities is certainly important for any beginning archivist, but if archival education is restricted to that, too much is left out. At worst, this approach trains students only for their first job, probably an entry-level position in which processing will be most important. It leaves out of the picture larger concerns (administrative and policy matters, professional ethics, planning, and outreach, for instance), which archivists are left to pick up on their own during the remainder of their careers—probably at some future workshop! Without saying so explicitly, our concern has been with what an archivist can be trained to *do*, rather than with what an archivist should be educated to *know*.

Shifting attention from action to knowledge requires overcoming the workshop mentality and focusing instead on development of the curriculum of archival education programs. Most importantly, we need to promote the organization and growth of courses that have genuine intellectual substance to them. In light of the evidence compiled by Ericson that demonstrates just how flimsy some of our courses are, we need to push archival education in the direction of more systematic approaches to the varied aspects of archival knowledge. We need, in other words, to encourage development of what might be called "real" courses in archival education, not merely supervised internships and practica masquerading as courses.

A real course, whether in archives or any other professional discipline, is one that explores in some detail and at some leisure a defined and significant topic. It proceeds through a formally structured approach consisting of regular class meetings, assigned readings, class discussions, as well as student research and written work. A real course also has a rigorous means of evaluation of the students by the instructor, most often accomplished through examinations and the rating of papers. There is no information that is available on the standards by which archival instructors currently evaluate their students, perhaps another unconscious result of the workshop mentality. At most, one gets a certificate for participating in a workshop but never a grade or other assessment to express how well one has absorbed the material, if at all. In this same vein, we may also wonder about the extent of grade inflation in university-based archival education programs. An internship course or seminar in which each student is working on a particular project in a nearby archival repository, with the class assembling only occasionally to hear progress reports and discuss common problems, is certainly worthwhile. Practical experiences will remain important for the archival student, but they are not the inevitable or exclusive next step after an introduction.

What kinds of real courses might we develop, and how many of them will a solid archival education program require? These

are questions that will face archival educators, particularly those with full-time appointments, in the 1990s. Fortunately, in thinking about instituting those courses, there are some models that might prove instructive, principally available from archival education programs outside the United States. The University of British Columbia and the University of New South Wales have been developing multi-course programs over the last decade, for example, and their experience should be mined for possible application here. For purposes of preliminary discussion, let me propose one approach to instituting and developing better archival coursework.

This approach turns on the notion of "clusters" of courses. Working from the 1988 education guidelines and some of the work on defining the areas of archival knowledge (an obviously crucial task, some of the momentum for which was provided by the effort to construct a certification examination), it is possible to identify several broad curriculum areas that archival education should cover.[3] I would propose seven such clusters, under the following headings: Introductory; Theory and Practice; Archival Functions; Institutions and Repositories; Management; Record Formats; and Practicum. Archival education programs should be encouraged to develop specific courses in each of these clusters and to offer those courses on a regular, probably rotating, basis.

[3]"Society of American Archivists Role Delineation," *SAA Newsletter*, January 1989, 6-8. This was prepared to provide the developers of the certification examination with an outline of the "major domains of archival practice" that comprise the "commonly accepted duties and responsibilities that professional archivists perform." The role delineation document was based in part on an earlier effort by the SAA Committee on Education and Professional Development to compile descriptions of all the various competencies required of archivists in their diverse areas of responsibility; see SAA Committee on Education and Professional Development, "Archival Competencies Statements," (unpublished working document, October 1988).

The Archival Functions cluster, for example, would be the place for a specific, semester-long course in appraisal, another in reference, another in records management, another in preservation, and so on. The Institutions and Repositories cluster might offer a course in the particular problems of public records, another in the management of private manuscripts and rare books, another in the care of the archival records of non-archival institutions and organizations. The Record Formats cluster would contain courses on machine-readable records, micrographics, the administration of photograph collections, and other types of material where the form of the records affects what the archivist must do to manage them successfully. (See Figure 1 for a preliminary list of possible courses in each of the clusters.)

Applying this approach, each university-based archival education program would be able to work progressively at adding real courses to its curriculum. What is more, each program could, with encouragement and perhaps even pressure from SAA and other professional organizations, gradually increase its offerings over time, adding a new course or two, distributed among the clusters, each year. At least for the foreseeable future, it will probably remain impossible to offer all or even most of these courses all the time. A rotating system of offerings, however, could easily take shape: the introductory course would be offered every year—in some schools, depending on demand, possibly every semester; one or two particular courses, chosen from the other clusters in succession, would also be available each term. Students would take these courses as they came around in rotation and depending on each student's own interests and career plans.

Such an approach to archival curriculum development is certainly ambitious, and the problems of implementing it cannot be minimized. The clusters proposed here may not be the right ones; the courses identified

Figure 1

ARCHIVAL CURRICULUM CLUSTERS

Introduction to Archives Cluster
    Introduction to Archival Theory and Practice
Theory and Practice Cluster
    Research Seminar in Archival Administration
    History of Archives and the Archives Profession
    Development of Archival Theory
    Current Archival Issues
    Independent Readings and Research
Archival Functions Cluster
    Appraisal
    Arrangement, Description, and Reference
    Reference Service in Archives
    Preservation Administration
    Current Records Management and Archives
    Archival Public Programs
Institutions and Repositories Cluster
    Management of Public Records
    Private Manuscripts and Rare Books
    Institutional and Organizational Archives
Management Cluster
    Introduction to Management Principles and Techniques
    Budgeting and Personnel Management
    Space and Facilities Planning
    Program Planning and Development
    Legal Issues for Archivists
    Archival Ethics
Record Formats Cluster
    Machine-Readable Records
    Micrographics
    Photographic and Visual Records
    Aural Records and Oral History
Practicum Cluster
    Directed Archival Internship
    Extended Student Project
    Archives Thesis

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may not be the right ones either. How will we evaluate the substantive content of those courses? The administrative battles to get new courses approved are never easy. How many credits will these courses have, and how many courses will students concentrating in archives as part of a master's degree be required to take? Many host departments, whether of history or library science, may be reluctant to expand the archival component of joint degree programs at the expense of what they probably consider the more important parent discipline. Archival educators will have to convince themselves that specialized courses are really viable, that there is enough intellectual content for a separate course on archival history, for example, or a seminar on the

development and nature of archival theory. I myself am entirely convinced that there is, but those who find any archival theorizing to be "much ado about shelving" will take another view, and they will have to be converted.[4]

The development of the archival curriculum according to a clustering system will encounter other problems. The question of teaching materials remains unsettled. What kinds of readings and class exercises not now in existence will have to be created to support particular courses? Will archival educators have sufficient access to records in specialized formats to be able to offer courses that analyze those formats? Finally, having just won the battle to appoint a single full-time archival educator in a handful of universities—and, of course, many archival educators have not even won that battle yet—archivists will have to begin campaigning to appoint a second full-time archival educator or at least additional adjunct faculty. That in itself will be no easy task. "What do you mean we need

another archivist?" history department chairs and library school deans will ask; "we just hired *you*, didn't we?" These objections are all serious, but none is serious enough to prevent the attempt. Proposals for other approaches to this general problem are welcome.

If archivists truly believe what they say about the importance of their work and the necessity of a solid preparation to undertake it, they should at least begin to improve the content of that preparation. Actuarially, the archival profession remains a relatively young one, but each of us is personally aware (sometimes painfully so) that time is passing and that a new professional generation is replacing an older one. It is a new generation that has chosen archives as a career more deliberately than most of their elders by consciously seeking out formal archival education in a graduate school. The archivists who will replace us will be the product of the professional educational system we develop. What do we want our successors to be? What do we want them to know that we did not? What kinds of education that we lacked would be helpful to them? By beginning to promote curriculum development in archival education, we can make a start at addressing those questions.

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[4]John W. Roberts has been banging this particular drum for some time, and he is not alone in the opinion. See his "Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (1987): 66-74, and "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality?" ibid., 53(1990):110–20.