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THE ROLE OF STATE BOARDS AND COORDINATORS:
FUNCTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Martha M. Bigelow

The roles of the state advisory boards and the coordinators are inextricably tied together. They, of course, also depend on the philosophy of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) itself. Until the commission clarifies its position as to whether it is to be a granting agency or whether it is to develop a viable nationwide records program in the states, the roles of the boards and the coordinators will remain fuzzy.

It would appear that the original intent in creating the advisory boards was to create an agency in each state that would develop plans and priorities for records programs in the states, and at the same time would be the arm of support for the commission on a national level both in its programs and in its congressional appropriations. This concept was based on the preservation model.

From the start, however, there was a major difference between the two programs. The preservation program always allocated its funds directly to the state. Since the commission did not wish to do this, it has in a sense developed a hybrid kind of board--boards that the commission would like to operate as the State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPO) and Review Boards do, yet without the power and

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responsibility that the SHPO and review boards have.

Evidently the commission staff had a model in their minds similar to the granting procedures for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and thus have incorporated part of the NEH procedures into the NHPRC procedures. This applies particularly to the projects that are regional and national in scope.

The NEH procedures best fit the concept of the commission as simply a granting agency. If this is to remain the concept on which the commission chooses to operate, then there would be two alternatives: abolish the boards and coordinators, or keep the boards. If the boards are abolished, then the commission would adopt essentially the procedures of NEH--reviews of grant proposals would first be made by professional colleagues, and a review panel (the commission) would make the final decision. (This is basically the procedure used now, except the advisory boards substitute for the first level of NEH review by professional colleagues.) There would be no need for boards or coordinators under this system. If the commission accepts the philosophy that it is a granting agency only, but wants to keep the boards and coordinators, it then becomes clear that the boards would be only the first level of review, and boards would have less concern about their functions and responsibilities.

The boards could still be effective tools in the states that choose to use them in a positive way. Boards set up under a loosely-structured program like the present one could, for example, serve useful peripheral functions, such as "consciousness raising" about records needs and, in some states, mediating jurisdictional disputes among archives. However, the decision as to how they would be used would depend on the individual coordinators and the conditions in each state.

That in essence is what is happening today. Two programs, Iowa and New York, are often cited as having excellent boards. In both instances, the coordinators saw a need to develop a state archives program. They allocated funds for staff to serve the boards, and used the boards effectively for the purpose they had decided on. In essence the boards became archival commissions for their states. States that use the boards in this fashion would have to allocate at least staff support, and preferably staff support and travel funds, for the boards.

The composition of the boards and their roles and responsibilities would thus be left up to the states to determine. Some states might choose to appoint very large boards which would be honorary appointments, and the coordinator would then be responsible for sending the requests for grants to those individuals on the board who had the greatest expertise in the area in which the grant was being made. There would be no need to call the board together, and therefore no need for grant support, except perhaps for a small amount to the coordinator's office to take care of minimal expenses. The boards could perhaps include forty or fifty people in the state who are interested in records programs, and who see this as an honorary appointment and an occasional opportunity to review grants which would then be decided in Washington. This system would serve to give some widespread support to the program, but would not make it a viable statewide records program.

The other alternative is for the commission to decide that the records program is really to be a state-federal partnership. The records program could then be based on the same type of organization as the state historic preservation officers, that is, the coordinator would remain the head of the state archives or state historical society and be appointed by the governor and bear the responsibility for fiscal accounting. State archival agency staff would provide

the administrative support for the board. The coordinator would act as executive secretary to the board, and his or her staff would serve board activities.

Commission funds would be allocated to the states according to an agreed-upon formula. A small percentage of the funds would be used for staff and travel support for the board; the rest of the funds would be subgranted for records projects in the state. The board would be responsible for determining policy and making decisions on the subgrants made within the state.

The national commission would develop detailed guidelines for the state records program, similar to historic preservation guidelines, which would establish the functions and responsibilities of boards and coordinators. Only those states following the guidelines would be eligible to participate. The boards would thus become a vital and important part of a statewide program. The coordinators and the boards would have a stake in the ongoing program and would expend efforts in trying to see that the program expanded in every way.

A fourth option would be to use an amalgam of both systems. All regional and national grants would be reviewed by procedures that were essentially NEH procedures. State boards would continue to review all state grant requests, but in those states that met certain qualifications set up by the commission, block grants or pass-through grants would be made to the boards. These grants, in addition to providing money to subgrant within the state, would have to provide overhead for administrative costs, including staff support and board travel expenses. In order to avoid charges of favoritism, there would have to be a very careful development of criteria for this program, so that any state that wanted to participate in the block grant system would be eligible once it met the commission's requirements.

In conclusion, then, it would appear to me that there are only four options available to the commission: (1) abolish the boards and coordinators and rely on NEH grant procedures; (2) keep the boards and coordinators in their present loosely structured usage, and let each state just do the best it can; (3) go to an SHPO system of strong coordinators and boards, with funds granted directly to the state and the programs operated under guidelines set by the commission; or (4) choose an amalgam of the above three, in which there would be no strong guidelines from the commission, but the option of pass-through, or block, grants would be given to those states which met the requirements.

Those of us with SHPO experience probably incline toward that system, believing that such procedure would best serve the idea of a national records program based on the individual differences between states. However, other states with different experiences may prefer the other options. One thing is certain--some clear-cut decision must be made regarding the role of the boards and the coordinators. This group can certainly make the recommendations, but the final decision can come only from the commission.