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TRENDS IN FUNDING ARCHIVAL PROGRAMS:
AN ANALYSIS OF PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE NHPRC

Michael F. Kohl

During the past four years, the records program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission has been a vehicle for change in archives. With a mandate for expanded responsibilities, the NHPRC has nurtured the development of new archival programs, rescued records from imminent destruction, advocated the placement of competent personnel, and encouraged the adoption of accepted archival practices. This paper will examine the records grant program of the NHPRC from a number of perspectives and attempt to assess its present performance and future directions.

A study of 218 grant applications submitted to NHPRC between January 1976 and February 1978 reveals that the average amount requested was approximately \$26,000; the average amount granted was \$20,200. State institutional applications far outnumbered those of state cooperative, regional or national applications. Nearly 40 percent of the applicants were colleges and universities. Non-profit organizations such as public libraries, hospitals, professional societies and senior citizens centers composed the second largest applicant group. (See Table I.) A breakdown of the submitting agencies indicates that information about the records program is beginning to reach a wide variety of organizations outside the academic and historical society circles.

More than 50 percent of the proposals indicated that a significant aspect of their project involved increasing the awareness of researchers to the existence of records and enhancing the researcher's ability to use records. Another 40 percent listed preservation and reproduction as their primary goal, while about 30 percent listed surveying and accessioning. The large number of survey and preservation projects reflected the NHPRC's emphasis upon "endangered records."¹ Over a quarter of the applicants mentioned the establishment of a new archival program.

The vast majority of proposals dealt with collections composed primarily of paper manuscripts. Photographs constituted the only non-manuscript material for which a significant number of proposals were made. The provenance of these records ranged over a wide variety of sources, with the papers of individuals and private organizations being

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TABLE I
APPLICANT TYPE

	Number	Percent
Historical Societies	32	14.7
State Archives	12	5.5
Colleges & Universities	86	39.4
Local Governments	23	10.6
Religious Institutions	8	3.7
Miscellaneous Non-Profit	50	22.9
State Advisory Boards	7	3.2

the most common. Local and state government records were the next two most common types of collections. (See Table II.)

The dates of collections included in these applications indicate that proposals covering a wide breadth of records -- from colonial through contemporary periods -- were submitted. The dates of collections were fairly evenly distributed over our nation's history. One rather surprising finding was that on over half of the applications one could not discern the major time period concerned, demonstrating the problem of vagueness and lack of information which characterized many of the proposals.

A number of the applications studied contained serious weaknesses. For example, in one proposal the total budget was either over \$100,000 or over \$200,000; the exact amount could not be determined because the receipts and disbursements were combined for a grand total. (This proposal also contained the salary for a bookkeeper as a part of the proposed budget.) Other proposals were almost as poorly written. Some ignored NHPRC restrictions on the purchase of capital equipment and the preservation of records as artifacts; others were evidently unaware of the Commission's severe financial limitations. In one case a Midwestern institution requested approximately 10 percent of the NHPRC's total funding for the records program, and attached a note admitting that even more money might be needed the following year. On the whole, many applications could have been improved if the NHPRC guidelines had been carefully read and if someone with a knowledge of basic accounting methods had reviewed the budget.

A comparison of the proposals reveals a few general differences between successful and unsuccessful submissions. For instance, a higher percentage of successful applications dealt with local government records or microfilming projects. Also, accepted proposals asked for substantially less money (an average of approximately \$4500 less) and generally claimed less in cost sharing funds (averaging approximately \$5800 less). It should be noted that the amount of cost sharing accepted by the NHPRC staff was reduced, on the average, by \$600 for applications recommended for acceptance and by over \$3500, on the average, for those recommended for rejection. These adjustments would recommend a careful assessment of the actual costs borne by the applicant, rather than a concern that a sufficiently large dollar amount of cost sharing was claimed.

When assessing what qualities were crucial in a recommendation to accept or reject a proposal, the survey findings permit the following observations:

1. Significant positive factors which influenced the acceptance of a grant included the assessments that: the applicant's project dealt with historically valuable records which were in need of preservation; the project's staff was competent and had the professional skills

TABLE II
PROVENANCE OF RECORDS

	Number	Percent
Federal Government	8	3.7
State Government	33	15.1
Local Government	63	28.9
Church & Church-related Organizations	16	7.3
Business & Labor	35	16.1
Individuals & Private Organizations	82	37.6
College & University	14	6.4
Mixture	7	7.8

needed to accomplish the program's goals; the project could serve as a prototype; and the project was a cooperative undertaking involving two or more institutions.

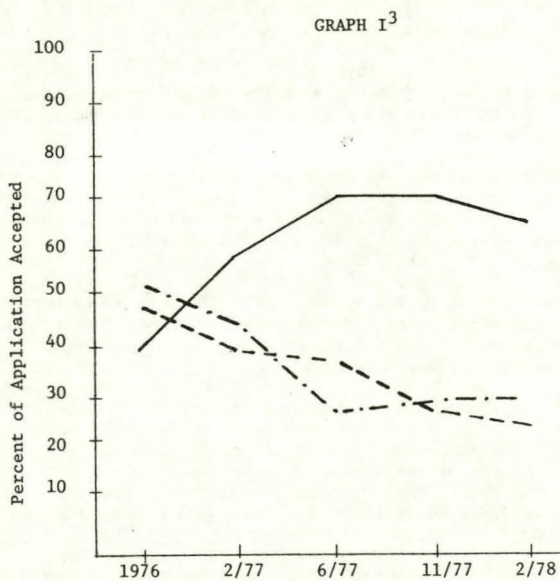
2. Negative considerations which weighed against applications included the judgments that: the proposal did not meet the guidelines for the records program; the project staff or the institution involved might be incapable of successfully handling the project; and the project seemed not to be a high priority task.

3. Instances in which the state's NHPRC Advisory Board recommended approval of proposals that were later rejected by the NHPRC staff and Commission usually involved a difference of opinion with respect to some or all of the factors already mentioned.

4. While there were a considerable number of proposals recommended for approval by state Advisory Boards that were later recommended for rejection by the NHPRC staff and Commission, only two proposals were accepted by the Commission after having been recommended for rejection by a state Board. One can therefore conclude that approval by the state Board is of major importance, although it does not guarantee approval of any application.

5. The NHPRC staff and Commission considered the maturity of the archival program at the applying agency. This consideration cut both ways. A number of relatively mundane records-use proposals from institutions with established archival programs and professional staffs were rejected, partly due to a lack of creativity by the applicants, i.e., a hesitance to break new archival ground and develop proposals whose results would be of benefit to other archival institutions. For example, a proposal from a respected historical society that requested funds to process part of its backlog was rejected. Conversely, a number of proposals from new archival programs to acquire, preserve, and process records deemed particularly useful in documenting aspects of American life for which there are currently important gaps in the historical record were accepted by the Commission in spite of reservations concerning staff and procedures. Indeed, one could say that all else being equal, the more established the applicant, the more the NHPRC expected the project to show innovation, cooperation among institutions, and greater cost sharing. This expectation is reflected in the NHPRC's funding policy as included in the 1978 draft of the Report to the President: "The Commission's responsibility is to plan, coordinate, and support projects which would begin to change rather than reinforce the existing state of affairs."²

As shown by Graphs I and II, there has been a steady overall decline in the percentage of applications recommended for approval by the NHPRC staff and Commission, and an increasing percentage of all

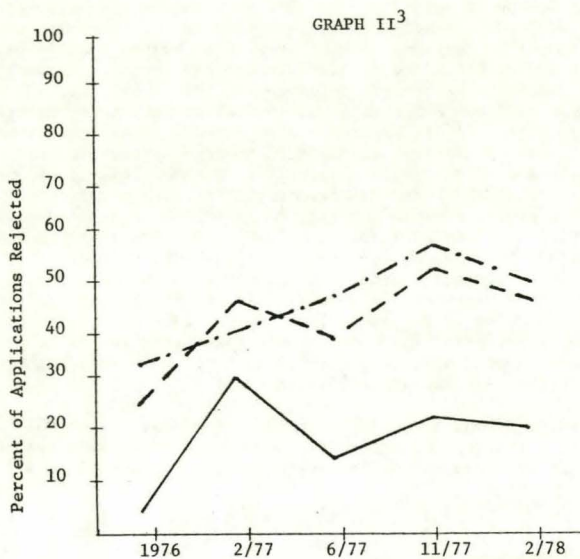


LEGEND

- - - NHPRC Staff Recommendation

— State Advisory Board Recommendation

- · - NHPRC Commission Decision



applications rejected. One obvious and increasingly severe problem is the limited funds with which the records program is now operating. There was a 200 percent increase in funding requests during 1977.

The continued substantially higher approval rate by the state NHPRC Boards, on the other hand, points to one of the major problems now confronting the NHPRC. Some state Boards appear to have difficulty rejecting applications, preferring that the NHPRC turn down the weak proposals. This practice not only adds to the burdens of the NHPRC, but lessens the credibility of the state Boards as well. Many state Boards recommend applications, even though they are not considered top priority, if it appears that the projects have some merit and will be undertaken in a professional manner.

Thus, the NHPRC faces challenges in a number of areas. A continued escalation of funding requests of the proportion witnessed between 1977 and 1978 will strain the effectiveness of the program unless there are commensurate increases in funding for both staff and the programs. If such funding is not forthcoming, one can expect increasing pressure to narrow the scope for funding as well as an increasing number of rejections of projects which should be funded.

The increased demands upon the records program, moreover, must not result in further raids on the NARS budget. Such a short-sighted policy must be resisted in order to preserve the federal government's archival program, which has served as a model and source of guidance since the 1930s. The current separate re-authorization of the NHPRC will perhaps solve this problem since it will be removed from consideration as part of the NARS budget.

Funding of survey projects will in the future be dependent upon the incorporation of accessioning activities as well as long-term commitments by the institutions which undertake such projects to process and make the records available to researchers. The logic which requires record surveys to include accessioning programs also results in the conclusion that such projects contribute a goodly amount of benefits directly upon the particular institutions conducting the survey-accessioning projects.

Assuming sufficient funding, one can predict a continued effort to accession, preserve and make available for researchers the records of minorities and women. At the same time, one should hope that funding will be available for continued prototype projects as well as increased efforts to collect and preserve non-manuscript records including phonograph records, tape-recordings and, in particular, television broadcast material. These materials warrant attention because of the technical problems which prototype projects might aid repositories in solving. There are also a number of subjects which have been neglected in collection development and records preservation

and could benefit from NHPRC-funded programs. Documentation for many aspects of modern American culture lags far behind the collection of papers of twentieth-century legislators, for example.

Any discussion of the NHPRC records program, however, would be incomplete without mentioning the considerable and beneficial impacts the Program is having upon archives and the archival profession in the form of encouragement, sustenance, and guidance. Although the NHPRC has shied away from setting specific standards, the Commission has insisted that recommended projects be staffed by competent persons and follow generally accepted archival practices. The number of today's archivists who are cutting their archival teeth on NHPRC projects is probably about equal to those of the Depression era who found the Federal Records Program to be the stimulus and source of sustenance for beginning their archival careers. The experience and knowledge gained by archivists should be regarded as another benefit of the Records Programs, as should of course the boost it has given to the job market.

The institution of state Advisory Boards has provided a vehicle for encouraging coordination and assessment of archival needs and programs on a state-wide basis, often for the first time. The interaction of Board members as well as the NHPRC's active encouragement has fostered cooperation and mutually beneficial projects among archives, one of the most important results of the program. Almost every state now has a group of knowledgeable professionals who can develop state-wide priorities, give advice to institutions, and influence policies because of their connections with outside funding possibilities.

Archival techniques projects sponsored by the NHPRC have aided both archivists and other records keepers to be aware of sound archival practices. Such projects may become more common as their benefits are found to be considerable. The NHPRC has also given guidance through its decisions regarding proposals. Besides rejecting the funding of item-by-item indexing of manuscripts, calendaring or abstracting collection documents, and other costly reference tools, the NHPRC has shown its willingness to fund parts of projects for which there is a true need, while at the same time explaining the reasons for rejecting more grandiose schemes. In this manner, records have been properly preserved and described, and sponsoring institutions have been encouraged to adopt more appropriate archival methods.

The NHPRC's records program has been largely responsible for the establishment or revitalization of a number of archival repositories; Iowa's state archives program and the municipal archives of the City of Providence are just two examples. Indirectly, its influence has perhaps been even more pervasive in encouraging interest and

continued commitment by a number of institutions to their archival programs. More specifically, important records pertaining to such diverse aspects of our nation's history as plantation operations in Hawaii or the Dayton, Ohio, city manager's files have had their informational content preserved through timely grants from the NHPRC. An even larger number of collections have been made accessible to researchers. One can safely say that, for the investment of approximately \$20,000 per grant, the community of scholars is being efficiently supplied with new sources for research through the efforts of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Indeed, the work of the Commission represents a bargain that the American public cannot afford to pass up.

NOTES

¹National Historical Publications and Records Commission. "Record Program: Guidelines and Procedures; Applications and Grants (draft)." (NHPRC, Washington, D.C.: 1975), p. 2.

²National Historical Publications and Records Commission. "Report to the President, 1978 (draft)." (GSA, Washington, D.C.: 1978), pp. 25-26.

³These figures do not include some applications on which a decision was deferred, nor does it include those applications which were funded for less than 75 percent of the requested grant. Therefore, the "Percent of Applications Accepted" and the "Percent of Applications Rejected" do not total 100 percent.

⁴Communication from Larry J. Hackman, Deputy Executive Director, Records Projects, August, 1978.