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ACADEMIC ARCHIVISTS AND THEIR CURRENT PRACTICE: SOME MODEST SUGGESTIONS*

Patrick M. Quinn

College and university archives comprise the largest category of archival repository in the United States. Over a thousand repositories at institutions of higher learning are listed in the *Directory of College and University Archives*.¹ The College and University Archives Professional Affinity Group (PAG) of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) includes over four hundred members. Despite the fact that so many archivists work in the same field, their endeavor has remained largely unsystematized. Only recently have academic archivists begun efforts to synthesize their practice.

The two most important contributions to this process have been the publication of *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* in 1979 and the appearance in 1980 of "Guidelines for College and University Archives." Both produced by the College and University Archives Committee of the SAA, the *Selected Readings* brought together the most salient literature pertaining to academic archives published prior to June 1978 while the "Guidelines" provided an operational framework for such repositories.² More recently, Maynard Brichford placed the origins, evolution, and function of academic archives in historical context; Mary Janzen addressed questions concerning the papers of academics; and Jane Wolff discussed the relationship between academic archives and special subject repositories.³

In our culture, institutions of higher learning serve

*The author is indebted to Kevin B. Leonard and Mary E. Janzen for their thoughtful contributions to the article in its present form.

as primary transmitters of prevailing cultural, economic, political, and social values, of intellectual and technical knowledge, and of research methodologies. The role of archivists in documenting the functions of academic institutions has become increasingly more complex and challenging. Thus, it becomes even more imperative that academic archivists transcend their present practice, isolated and idiosyncratic as it often is, and begin to cope collectively with common problems by developing common approaches.

This article identifies several such problems, most of which are admittedly quite practical, and offers some suggestions for dealing with them. It does not pretend to be a sustained discussion of either current practice in academic archives or the entire range of problems confronting academic archivists. Such a discussion is at once necessary and desirable. It would be of immense benefit to academic archivists as would publication by the SAA of an introductory manual on college and university archives that would be similar to but broader in scope than those authored by Edie Hedlin for business archives and August Suelflow for religious archives.⁴

Records Management

Optimally, the academic archivist's involvement in the life cycle of the records that will ultimately comprise the permanent documentary record of his or her institution should begin with the generation and active phase of the life of records. Experience at most colleges and universities, however, reveals that this is a largely utopian ideal. The creation and maintenance of records, and often their disposition, too frequently is determined by the caprices of administrative and clerical personnel. At the departmental and committee level faculty members often have little or no appreciation of the status and value of their files as official university records. Thus, in all too many instances, the archivist simply inherits records that happenstantially manage to survive destruction. In the relatively few institutions where records management programs exist, records managers often are preoccupied with disposing of bulky fiscal records, clearing filing space without adequate

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appraisal of file contents, or engaging in microfilming projects of questionable value.

In the majority of institutions--i.e., those where no records management programs exist--the archives staff typically is stretched too thin to take an active role in developing a records management program. There are, of course, some exceptions to this rather bleak picture: Yale, Cornell, Wayne State, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Illinois, the University of California-Irvine, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.⁵

Most academic archivists must depend upon the voluntary cooperation of records-generators in order to carry out their mission effectively. Accordingly, the archivist should strive to establish and maintain good working relationships with persons who control the university's active records. Most important among these are legal counsels, business managers, fiscal officers, heads of public relations departments, registrars, directors of alumni affairs, development officers, administrative assistants, and departmental secretaries. A crucial aspect of these relationships is reciprocal information sharing. To their consternation, many archivists have found that they were not consulted when legal counsels and registrars began to interpret and implement the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (popularly known as the Buckley Amendment). The manner in which student records are maintained and disposed at most colleges and universities is often uninformed by archival considerations. At a minimum, archivists should provide appropriate academic officers with copies of Charles Elston's lucid discussion of this murky piece of legislation as well as the statement "The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Research Use of Student Records" issued by the SAA Committee on College and University Archives.⁶ Similarly, registrars would benefit from having access to Donald D. Marks's excellent critique of the archivally flawed *Retention of Records: A Guide for Retention and Disposal of Student Records*, published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. This guide emphasizes the

administrative value of student records without giving adequate consideration to their future value for sociologists, demographers, genealogists, and historians.⁷

At many academic institutions, microfilming operations are initiated by individual departments and administrators without consulting or even informing the archivist. The quality of the products of these microfilming ventures is at best uneven. Whenever possible, archivists should attempt to monitor such operations and provide administrators responsible for them with state-of-the-art literature that emphasizes the importance of high standards of quality control and the desirability of depositing security copies of all films and other microformats in the archives.

Where the transfer of noncurrent official records to the archives depends almost entirely upon the voluntary cooperation of creating offices, archivists will be most successful if they synchronize their solicitation efforts with the academic calendar. Traditional periods of staff turnover (the close of quarters, semesters, academic years) are times that records are most likely discarded. Scheduling may facilitate orderly transfer of routine records of midlevel administrative offices. Biographical files on deceased alumni or noncurrent faculty, for example, are particularly suited to annual retirement to the archives. Higher level administrators, however, are likely to retain their files throughout their tenure in office. Archivists should be alert to major turnovers in the administration, changes in department chairs, and the abolition of programs, departments and other records-generating offices.

Lack of space is, of course, a chronic problem for most academic archives as it is for other repositories. In areas where two or more repositories exist, archivists might wish to explore the feasibility of cooperatively renting or leasing off-campus space to store little used records.

Most importantly, academic archivists must continue the long-range process of developing generally applicable records retention and disposal schedules for commonly generated bodies of records. Such schedules must be flexible enough to accommodate the specific

needs of private colleges and universities as well as those supported by public funds. Hopefully, archivists can benefit from pioneering efforts recently completed at Cornell and Yale and presently underway within the University of Wisconsin system.

In repositories with only a small staff augmented by student assistants, it is usually impossible for the archivist to engage in extensive records management activities in addition to soliciting voluntary transfer of papers and records, processing, and providing reference service. Archivists may wish to consider encouraging their institutions to contract for records management services, even if this entails a one-shot effort to create and implement a university wide schedule. Once such a schedule is in place, it can provide a supportive framework for voluntary cooperation of records-creating offices.

Appraisal

Determining which records among the massive amount of documentation generated by academic institutions are of enduring value is perhaps the most vexing ongoing problem confronting academic archivists. Although Maynard Brichford, Nicholas Burckel, and others have addressed this problem, approaches to appraisal at various repositories are, on the whole, still exceedingly eclectic.⁸

In developing appraisal strategies for individual repositories, it is useful to separate factors in forming appraisal decisions into *internal* and *external* categories. Among internal factors which mitigate against the development of more uniform practices are such obvious considerations as staff, space, and budget limitations; the particular institution's age, size, and means of support (public or private); and the archives' age, mission, and reporting locus (whether the archives is a component of the library or the central administration).

Most academic archives fall between a *pure* archives which houses official records exclusively and a manuscript repository which, while campus based, may assign documentation of the university community a subordinate role. More often than not, college and

university archives combine an essentially administrative archival function with a broader cultural and historical collecting mandate. Official records are accessioned along with such nonofficial documentation as the papers of faculty, the records of student organizations, and, in some instances, the papers of alumni. Many academic archives house regional or thematic manuscript collections and even public records. Such archives serve primarily as broadly based research centers and their institutional archival function is secondary. Even without having a broad collecting mandate, academic archivists frequently find that nonarchival duties devolve upon them, including quasi-museum responsibilities for artifacts and the care of rare books and other special collections.

As repositories age, appraisal decisions usually must become much more rigorous. A newly established repository tends to accession most records and papers that become available. However, records and papers of a value comparable to those initially accessioned may be rejected as the repository matures and its shelves become crowded. Appraisal criteria are never static. They must constantly be modified in consonance with changing internal requirements.

External factors that help shape appraisal decisions are more tenuous. Largely, they relate to the acquisition of *discretionary documentation*, i.e., papers of faculty, trustees, and alumni, records of student organizations, and other nonofficial materials which complement the official records that comprise the core holdings of most academic archives. This is an area where cooperation among academic archivists would be most fruitful. Obviously, it is not necessary to preserve the papers of every professor of educational methods at each school in a ten-institution network of state-supported colleges or of every teacher of French at small liberal arts colleges in the midwest. Hopefully, networks such as the University of Wisconsin System Archives Council will be able to devise appraisal guidelines that can be applied in other states where large statewide educational systems exist. Moreover, the SAA College and University Archives PAG should assign

a high priority to investigating whether it is possible to develop cooperative appraisal strategies for collecting faculty papers or whether internal appraisal factors preclude such cooperation.

Accessioning

As adverse economic conditions continue to erode staff and funding at academic repositories, efficient accessioning procedures assume an even greater importance. Cutbacks in staff, increases in workloads, and the unending and increasing flow of records and papers into the archives combine to produce larger and larger backlogs of unprocessed records that are often inaccessible.

In order to save space and increase access to backlogged holdings, each accession should be thoroughly *presorted* before it is placed on shelves. Publications, duplicates, and other extraneous materials should be removed. Colleges and universities tend to produce proportionately more multiple copies of documents than most records-creating entities, including corporations and government bodies. This is because of their hierarchical structure, which encompasses large numbers of records-generating units and individuals, and the ready availability of photocopying machines. Almost invariably, copies of documents dispatched from central administrators may be found in the files of faculty members. Likewise, copies of agenda, minutes, newsletters, and reports issued by faculty governing bodies and university wide committees abound. Following the pre-sort, it is very helpful to prepare a rough *preliminary container list* that can provide a summary of the contents of each box in the accession.

College and university archives also receive large numbers of serial, occasional, and single-issue publications daily. These must be compared with existing holdings and filed with appropriate bibliographic and location control information recorded. An automated serials check-in system could save staff time that, before long, would more than offset start-up costs. The system recently adopted at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale might well be implemented elsewhere.⁹

Indeed, it is in the accessioning process that

minicomputers and word processors could be of enormous assistance to academic archivists. In addition to expediting control of publications, computers could facilitate quick access to the location of both organized and unorganized holdings, maintain statistics, and monitor available shelf space. By eliminating arduous and time-consuming manual accessioning procedures, larger and more accessible backlogs could be accommodated. Accessions of indeterminate value could be held for deferred appraisal awaiting the arrival of additional contextual records.¹⁰

Arrangement and Description

Given recent constrictions of staff resources, previous levels of processing may have to be scaled back. Since access to most holdings of academic archives is based upon the organic structure and interrelationships of generating offices, it may be possible to dispense with the administrative history components of descriptive inventories if container lists include meaningful folder titles and accurate span dates. Similarly, summary narrative descriptions of series may also be pared down, and the biographical section of inventories of faculty papers may be confined to a narrative chronology highlighting the faculty member's career.¹¹ The use of word processors in preparing descriptive inventories would also save considerable staff time.

Use

In many repositories, core usage involves only the epidermal layer of its total holdings. Student newspapers, yearbooks and directories; faculty biographical files; catalogues and bulletins; campus architectural and other subject reference files; and photographs--consulted briefly and unsystematically--comprise the most heavily used materials.

At many repositories, diminished scholarly use of holdings had coincided with a continuously increasing demand by administrators; development, public relations, and alumni affairs offices; and genealogists and other members of the public for information. Many academic archives have become in essence retrospective information service centers. They preserve a core of papers and records in order to meet their host institution's

administrative needs and to insure that there will be ample source material available for future institutional histories. Documenting the role that institutions of higher learning play in the larger social fabric is often an ancillary consideration. Providing information services, however, has placed an even greater burden on archivists, since general reference work requires far more staff time and effort than accomodating sustained research needs. Patrons seeking information expect instantaneous responses, while sustained researchers mine their own information once papers and records are made available to them. Moreover, serving as information specialists may be for some academic archivists as alienating as being a directory assistance operator for the phone company.

To be sure, the problems briefly addressed above are but a few of the many and complex ones facing academic archivists. The Society of American Archivists College and University Archives Professional Affinity Group is the logical vehicle for a more sustained and systematic consideration of these problems. As part of the ongoing process of developing a more rational collective practice, the "C & U" PAG hopefully will continue to build upon the solid contributions of its predecessor, the SAA College and University Archives Committee.

As academic archivists strive to overcome parochial institutional practices, they must also guard against a tendency to become estranged from other archival subfields. Solutions to problems relating to appraisal, arrangement and description, and use frequently can be adapted to most archival situations. Archival practice at academic repositories has much in common with practice at other types of repositories. In that sense, the groves of academe are just another part of the forest.

Notes

¹ SAA Committee on College and University Archives, comp., *Directory of College and University Archives in the United States and Canada* (Chicago:

Society of American Archivists, 1980).

² SAA Committee on College and University Archives, comp., *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979) (hereafter cited as *Selected Readings*); *idem*, "Guidelines for College and University Archives," *American Archivist* (hereafter cited as AA) 43, 2 (Spring 1980): 262-271.

³ Maynard J. Brichford, "Academic Archives: Überlieferungsbildung," AA 43, 4 (Fall 1980): 449-460; Mary E. Janzen, "Pruning the Groves of Academe: Appraisal, Arrangement and Description of Faculty Papers," *Georgia Archive* 9, 2 (Fall 1981): 31-41; Jane Wolff, "Faculty Papers and Special Subject Repositories," AA 44, 4 (Fall 1981): 346-351.

⁴ Edie Hedlin, *Business Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1978); August R. Suelflow, *Religious Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

⁵ See especially *Planning and Organizing a Joint Archives and Records Management Program* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1981).

⁶ Charles B. Elston, "University Student Records: Research Use, Privacy Rights and the Buckley Law," in *Selected Readings*, pp. 68-79; Marcia G. Synnott, "The Half-Opened Door: Researching Admissions Discrimination at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton," AA 45, 2 (Spring 1982): 175-187; Subcommittee on Student Records, SAA College and University Archives Committee, "The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the Research Use of Student Records," in *Selected Readings*, pp. 176-180.

⁷ Marks's article, scheduled to appear in the *Mid-western Archivist* 9, 1 (1983), is based upon a paper read at the 1980 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Cincinnati.

⁸ For a stimulating discussion of appraisal

strategies in general, see Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *AA* 44, 3 (Summer 1981). See also Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning*, Society of American Archivists, Basic Manual Series I (Chicago, 1977); *idem*, "Appraisal and Processing," in *Selected Readings*; Nicholas C. Burckel, "Establishing a College Archives: Possibilities and Priorities," in *Selected Readings*; *idem*, "The Expanding Role of a College and University Archives," *ibid.*

⁹ "Repository News: Southern Illinois University-Carbondale," *Midwest Archives Conference Newsletter* 10, 1 (July 1982): 23.

¹⁰ For recent contributions discussing computer applications in archives, see H. Thomas Hickerson, *Archives and Manuscripts: An Introduction to Automated Access*, Society of American Archivists, Basic Manual Series II (Chicago, 1982); Richard M. Kesner, "Microcomputer Archives and Records Management Systems: Guidelines for Future Developments," *AA* 45, 3 (Summer 1982); Marie K. Elson, "Spindex in a University Archives," *AA* 45, 2 (Spring 1982). See also Richard M. Kesner, comp. and ed., *Automation, Machine-Readable Record and Archival Administration: An Annotated Bibliography* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980) and Lawrence J. McCrank, ed., *Automating the Archives: Issues and Problems in Computer Applications* (White Plains, New York: Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc., 1981).

¹¹ For recent discussions of processing, see Helen W. Slotkin and Karen T. Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach," *AA* 45, 2 (Spring 1982); Karen T. Lynch and Thomas E. Lynch, "Rates of Processing Manuscripts and Archives," *Midwestern Archivist* 7, 1 (1982): 25-34; Megan Floyd Desnoyers, "When Is A Collection Processed?," *ibid.*: 5-23.