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PROGRAM PLANNING AND SERVICE POLICIES FOR A UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Nicholas C. Burckel

Any college or university archives must concern itself with the institutional records of legal, administrative, financial, or historical importance. But such lip-service to the standard shibboleths of the archival profession hardly equips a college archivist with the information needed to make important operational decisions reflected in program planning and service policies. After all, any record, at some point, has historical value. The real question is at what point must the archivist decide that a series, record group, or particular document has less value than another collection. By extension, the archivist may have to choose among a variety of possible programs or services. The murky world of appraisal and allocation of scarce resources has important implications for college archivists.

The institutional context, the university's age, size, and mission, usually provide the best indication of the type of program or service an archivist can and should develop. With that in mind, let us look at three distinct, but imaginary, situations which might suggest different programs and service strategies: one dealing with a new public institution developed in the past 20 years, another dealing with a small private institution, and a third dealing with a large mature institution. These models are designed less to replicate most college or university archives, than to prompt consideration of the issues raised.

New Public Institution

A significant number of new archives have been spawned by the development of state and municipal universities, frequently as part of a larger federated or multi-unit system. For the purposes of discussion, let us assume the state-supported institution draws primarily from a relatively well-defined geographic area, has primarily an undergraduate student body, and that the impetus for the creation of archives came from discussions between the library and a group of interested faculty. From this set of assumptions it is possible to suggest a program for the archives. For instance, since the archives will probably be housed in the library and be administratively accountable to it, the archivist will have to relate to the rest of the

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library's program. Thus it would make sense to develop a university archives as part of a special collections or manuscripts division of the library. Such organization also means that the fledgling archives will not likely be eliminated in times of tight budgets because it will be part of a larger unit which has already won recognition and legitimacy and has a natural constituency.

The direction of planning for the archivist, then, should be toward the development of historically significant collections relating to the institution and to the teaching and research interests of the faculty. The acquisition would loom larger than the collection of records relating to the administration of the institution or the possible development of a records management system. The collecting strategy will focus on the kinds of archival material that the faculty might be able to use, such as local community records. Collection of these kinds of materials might overlap with the research interests of faculty members who want a local setting in which to test their general hypotheses or interpretations. The local setting also provides ample materials and suggests a variety of projects in which students could be involved as an extension of classroom assignments. All this suggests that the focus of the university's archives will be from the institution toward the surrounding community and toward the faculty, students, and community users, rather than to the administration and staff. Vital university records will, of course, be solicited and collected, but they will not form the most frequently used set of records. This will probably be the case because of the public-service, rather than administrative-support, role that most will expect from the archives.

In this prototype, services will be largely to the patrons who use the collections, rather than to the donors. The services will be part of general library operational procedure. If, therefore, the library has a policy of permitting the faculty to xerox freely from its holdings, but charges a fee to other users, then the archives would probably adapt to that program. If the library has a policy of not spending more than x amount of time on telephone or mail reference requests, then the archives may well be required to adopt that policy. Just how detailed finding aids will be and how much work the archivist will do for the potential researcher will depend on the size of the collections and the staff. The use pattern may also dictate whether the collections will be exhaustively indexed, or whether unprocessed collections will be at least minimally processed for immediate use. The pattern holds across nearly all the potential services which an archives can provide.

Small Private Institutions

Private institutions frequently have religious origins and derive their distinctive type of education from these historical roots. The private institutions are primarily undergraduate, emphasizing the liberal arts and tend

to have a large proportion of resident students. Let us here assume that the impetus for creation of an archives came from an administration interested in preserving its historical record and in using the archives in an administrative support capacity. The institution has the archives report to the vice-president for general administration.

In this organizational framework, the major concern of the archivist is to collect and process information that reflects the general history of the campus and to collect those administrative records which have not only historical value, but also legal, financial, and administrative value. Such an archives will likely not initially seek strong faculty or student input, will probably exercise more restriction over access to collections, and might not develop significant contacts with the surrounding community. The archivist would probably establish vertical reference files of photos, news clippings, and biographical material of use to the alumni office, the public information office, and the religious community.

He may be called upon to provide background information for alumni newsletters, to respond to letters of inquiry for historical information addressed to the president and other administrators and to prepare displays and help research a general history of the school. The types of records the archivist will collect and process relate specifically to the origin and history of the college, particularly as seen through the papers of previous administrators and the available published records. If the institution was founded by a religious order, then, inevitably, the records of the order and the relationship between the order and the governance of the school will feature prominently in the collection strategy.

Here, for instance, the administrative support function of the archives helps dictate the best service policies. One of the most obvious contributions an archives can make is initiating a records management service for the administrative areas of the campus. The justification would obviously be the increase in office efficiency, elimination of duplication, and cost savings which would result from removal of a substantial portion of records to less than prime office file space. The budget of the archives or its position in the administrative structure of the campus will also suggest other service policies. For instance, it may be possible and necessary to adopt a charge-back procedure for referencing records or supplying the office of origin with inventories. Alternatively it may be possible to establish a procedure at the time of acquisition that the office of origin transfer records to the archives only after a certain amount of routine work has been done on the records. In all of these instances, the primary clientele of the archives are the administrative offices and service policies would follow that emphasis.

Large Institution

A large institution, particularly one that is well-established, usually has some form of archives, whether it grew out of a library special collections program or was established by the campus administration. These institutions have several colleges and a developed graduate program. They draw their student body from a statewide area and frequently from the entire country. They have a variety of professional programs and a large number of resident students. For the sake of discussion, let us assume that the archives grew out of a group of interested faculty who persuaded the administration to support the establishment of a university archives and to provide it with funding, housing it administratively under the General Services division of the university, along with other campuswide services.

Here the lines of authority are not distinct. The faculty worked for the development of the archives, but organizationally the unit reports to and is financially dependent on the administration. The archivist has the problem of serving two masters whose needs may be different if not at times contradictory. The best strategy for developing program plans may be to suggest the creation of an advisory committee which would make recommendations on general policy. A combined faculty-administration committee, then, could be the forum for developing the collection thrust and the division of labor and resources among programs. At such a large institution, the archives committee can also serve an important educative function to other faculty and administrators about the nature and purpose of the archives, its programs, and possible services. If it is to serve that function, then the committee should include not just historians or librarians, but also social scientists, senior faculty long associated with the institution, and administrators who deal with the legal, financial, and academic and personnel records of the institution. Obviously, function, rather than title, should determine the composition of the committee. The relationship between the committee and the archivist will be critical — a relationship in which the archivist must maintain his professional integrity while trying to be of greatest service to the institution.

Large universities present the most difficult problem for developing service policies because of their inherently diverse nature. Usually such complexity causes the archives to serve multiple functions and a variety of patrons: campus, administration, staff, faculty, students, community citizens, and scholars from other institutions. Here again, however, the organizational structure, the budget and staff will point the way toward the best mix of services. An archives committee that represents the range of potential users can serve as a sounding board for major service policies that may have an impact on either the archives staff or the patron. Fee for services, extent of service to generating office, and extent of service for patrons must reflect a balance of the demands made on the archives and its ability to execute those demands.

Conclusions

All of these examples seem to suggest a rather nebulous role for college archivists, a role determined by a "situation ethics" philosophy or a "politics-of-survival" mentality. There is some truth to that observation, and I can only respond that if one does not have the support of an important segment of the university, the archives will soon atrophy. For a library or office of student affairs, there is a clearly defined constituency and a long-respected tradition of recognition of their place in higher education. That has not been the tradition in this country for university archives, and, therefore, the archivist must respond to the needs of his institution. Those needs may not be well defined and may vary from campus to campus. The archivist needs to determine his constituency and serve it. Doing so is merely to recognize the framework in which an archival program can develop.

Not all of this need imply a sinister plot to justify an archives at any cost. Looking at the establishment of an archives from the perspective of the needs of the institution, program planning and service policy-making then becomes a question of analyzing which parts of an archival program best address those needs. Once these are determined, the archivist can formulate the most useful program with the available resources. In that respect, then, it is similar to the responsibility of all other campus units which must make the greatest use of the money and staff available. Thus the first step is to develop an archival program around the needs of the institution; then look afield to see what else can and should be done to create a comprehensive university archives.