

ADOPTING AND ADAPTING RECORDS MANAGEMENT TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

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ABSTRACT: A comprehensive records management program has proven an elusive goal at many college and university archives, partially because of the development of college and university archives out of the manuscript tradition. A 1987 survey of archives at twelve universities showed that the archives are modifying records management to suit their particular situation while continuing traditional archival services. Elements of an archives and records management program are discussed with particular emphasis on adopting and adapting certain records management techniques to fit individual college and university archives.

Introduction

In 1987, two consultants—one a director of a state archives and the other a NARA administrator—told the staff of the University of Michigan Archives and Records Program that the program did not “do” records management.¹ In truth, the staff was not operating a comprehensive records management program, but was using selected records management techniques and traditional archival procedures. Furthermore, it seems likely that records management, as practiced by the University of Michigan Archives and Records Program and other colleges and universities may never meet the records management program criteria of a director of a state archives or of a NARA administrator. What it might accomplish, however, is the documentation of complex, modern institutions of higher learning.

A comprehensive records management program includes most, if not all of the following activities: evaluating and controlling the creation of records, forms, and filing systems; managing active files; conducting systematic records surveys; using those surveys to develop retention and disposition schedules; transferring selected inactive records to a records center for temporary storage; transferring records to the archives for permanent retention; using micrographics for security, preservation, and/or space reduction; managing vital records; and developing a records management procedures manual.² A comprehensive records management program has proven an elusive goal at many college and

university archives. Perhaps it is elusive because for some it is the wrong goal. It is the wrong goal because it disregards the traditions of those college and university archives that have developed out of an historical manuscript tradition and because it requires greater institutional support than many college and university archives are given.

Records Management and the Historical Manuscript Tradition

Archival literature gives credit to government archivists for the development of records management programs. As Maynard Brichford described it in an address to the New England Archivists in April of 1979, "Faced with huge masses of records and the indiscriminate desires of scholars that everything of interest to them be saved, archivists turned their attention to the records-making and records-keeping procedures in the offices of origin...As archival concerns merged with management concerns, the field of records management developed."³ State records management programs were developed following the federal example. The onset of this phenomenon occurred, for the most part, during and after World War II.

College and university archives did not follow the federal and state example; they were not quick to develop comprehensive records management programs. As late as 1979 Brichford could make the comment that "few universities have adopted major programs....Many programs have a 'low profile'....Many other university records management programs are 'invisible' or non-existent."⁴ The reluctance to adopt comprehensive records management programs on the part of college and university archives may be explained by their roots in the historical manuscript tradition and by the modest support accorded many archives by their parent institutions.

Long after federal and state governments began developing comprehensive records management programs to cope with the mass of modern records, at many colleges and universities records were being saved, if they were preserved at all, as manuscript collections. Records management programs as developed by state and federal governments were considered alien at college and university archives that had developed out of an historical manuscript tradition.

Some colleges and universities attempted to cope with modern records responsibilities by separating records management from the archives; at some public institutions in states with strong records management programs the university records were included in the statewide records system. Both the historical manuscript tradition of many pioneering college and university archives and the development of records management programs separate from archives at other institutions tended to create an intellectual climate in which collegiate archival and records management programs were seen as separate and distinct.

The Elusiveness of Comprehensive Records Management Programs

The University of Michigan is representative of the many college and university archives and records programs that have developed out of an historical manuscript tradition. In 1935 a young history professor was given \$1,200 and two charges: to collect documentation of the history of the state of Michigan

and to collect documentation of the history of the university. A governing bylaw written two years later created the Michigan Historical Collections as the institution to house these documentation efforts. The bylaw made no distinction between the historical manuscripts collections and the university archives.⁵ From 1935 to 1979 there was no differentiation between the staff and procedures that were used to collect university records and historical manuscripts documenting the state of Michigan. In 1979, for the first time, staff was hired specifically to collect, preserve, and process university records. At that time the first effort to introduce records management techniques was begun.

To help the staff understand how other universities "do" records management and to assess the support provided by other institutions to their archives programs, the Bentley Historical Library conducted a survey in January 1988 of twelve "peer" institutions.⁶ The results of this survey provide evidence to support an hypothesis regarding the elusiveness of comprehensive university records management programs.

The survey included six large public and six medium-sized private universities.⁷ The six public universities had enrollments between 30,000 and 50,000; the six private institutions' enrollments were between 9,000 and 17,000. Budgets figures for the archives ranged from \$37,000 to \$750,000; professional staff from one to seven; support staff from zero to seven; stack space from 2,400 linear feet to 50,000 linear feet; holdings from 2,500 to 50,000 linear feet; and accessions over the last five years from 600 to 10,000 linear feet (see Table 1).

Ten of the twelve archives reported operating under a written authorization—usually from the trustees or corporation—which defined the university community's responsibility to university records and/or defined university records. It is not enough to have a written authorization spelling out the respective responsibilities of university units and the archives for university records. Such an authorization needs to be interpreted; the information that will enable units to act on the authorization needs to be disseminated to them. Most respondents use a records management manual. Others use brochures, workshops, and personal contact.

TABLE 1
INSTITUTIONAL STATISTICS

	low		mean		high	
	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
Student body	30,000	9,000	39,706	13,056	50,000	17,000
Archives budget	37,000	65,436	64,982	247,185	100,000	750,000
Professional staff	1.5	1	2.39	2.93	6	7
Support Staff	0	1.5	.78	3.48	2	7
Stack space (linear ft.)	2,400	10,000	17,200	30,000	32,000	50,000
Holdings (linear ft.)	2,500	10,000	12,250	30,000	22,000	50,000
Accessioned in last five years (linear ft.)	600	1,500	3,360	5,750	6,133	10,000

Statistics on institutions from survey conducted in January 1988. Figures given are for 1988/89 academic year.

Many college and university archives have responsibility for more than university records—a result of originating as manuscript repositories. This is a complicating factor because nonuniversity records often do not fit into a records management program, yet they must be collected, processed, and preserved for research use. All twelve archives in the survey have responsibility for the collection and retention of faculty papers, student organization records, and alumni papers even though these materials are not defined as official university records. Nine of the twelve university archives accession nonuniversity historical manuscripts.

In response to the question, "Is records management a function of your repository?," nine archives answered yes, two answered that it was an informal function, and one institution is planning to implement a records management program in the near future. The survey then listed specific services, some corresponding to traditional archival procedures and some to records management techniques, and asked which of the services the archives provided (see Table 2). All twelve archives offer traditional archival services: archival storage, administrative reference, photocopying for reference use, consultation with individual units, and on-request surveys. All but two archives routinely prepare finding aids for accessioned records. Those two prepare finding aids only for selected units because most of their units create records inventories as part of the transfer procedure.

In contrast, the survey found that services that correspond to records management techniques were not uniformly provided. The centerpiece of comprehensive records management programs—a systematic and thorough survey of the institution's records and subsequent scheduling of all records series—is not the centerpiece of the respondents' programs. One archives had carried out a comprehensive survey with grant funds but was unable to follow up with comprehensive schedules and transfers. Another respondent reported having a systematic survey two-thirds complete. All respondents reported doing on-request surveys and nine archives schedule records series as a result of the on-request surveys.

Records center storage (temporary storage for scheduled records that may never be given permanent archival retention) is provided by eight archives. Certain genres of records—financial, personnel, student folders—are found in many units. Efficient records management would dictate that campus-wide guidelines or schedules should be created for these genres of records. Eight archives have campus-wide guidelines for financial records, three have guidelines for personnel files, and four for student folders.

Most of the archives surveyed are not doing records management as it is defined by state archives and by NARA. Not all the components of a comprehensive records management program are being used, and the records management techniques used are not applied to all units in a systematic manner. There is little evaluation or control of the creation of records, of forms, or of filing systems; management of active files is not standardized, but is a byproduct of consultation with individual units; records center storage is not an integral part of one-third of these programs; micrographics are used mostly for reference and only occasionally for security, preservation, and/or space reduction.

The inability or reluctance to adopt a comprehensive records management program may have several causes. First, colleges and universities are often

decentralized administratively, and as a result archivists work in an overall environment of relative autonomy. In such an environment mandates from governing boards are not an effective substitute for state and federal records laws. Second, most college and university archives are modestly funded which limits their ability to carry out extensive records management programs. Third, those college and university archives that developed out of the historical manuscript tradition may be reluctant to substitute records management techniques for traditional archival procedures. Failure to adopt comprehensive records management programs may also be explained by a change in the way archivists justify their work. In his 1974 article, "A University Archives and Records Management Program: Some Operational Guidelines," William

TABLE 2
SERVICES OFFERED BY ARCHIVES IN SURVEY TAKEN JANUARY 1988

	I	WM	WS	PS	MSU	UM	H	MIT	S	Y	NW	C
Archival storage	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Records center storage	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y ¹	Y	N
Finding aids	Y	Y ²	Y	Y	Y ²	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Administrative reference	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Document delivery	N	Y	Y	Y ⁵	Y	Y	N	Y	Y ⁵	N	Y	Y ¹
Arranging for microfilming	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Photocopying	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Consultation	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Workshops	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y
Boxing	Y ³	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
and moving	Y ³	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Box/folder lists created by archives prior to transfer	N	N	Y	Y	N ²	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y ⁵	N ⁴
Systematic survey	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y ¹	N	Y	Y	N
On-request survey	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Schedule records series	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Charge for service (excluding copying)	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y ¹	N	N	N	Y

I=University of Illinois; WM=University of Wisconsin/Madison; WS=Wayne State; PS=Penn State; MSU=Michigan State University; UM=University of Michigan; H=Harvard; MIT=Massachusetts Institute of Technology; S=Stanford; Y=Yale; NW=Northwestern; C=Cornell

1. Selected units only
2. Departments are required to prepare a records inventory when transferring records. Finding aids are prepared for a few selected units only.
3. For less than ten feet
4. Beginning on a contractual basis
5. On occasion

Saffady states that some university archives have justified their existence and budgetary allocations by assuming full records management responsibility.⁸ If archives in the 1970s justified their operations by cost saving through records management, archives today are more likely to promote their archival and records management function as part of the administrative responsibility of the institution and the existence of archival information as an institutional asset. Higher education has discovered the past as a marketable commodity. Colleges and universities, for example, rely on their past and their alumni's remembrance of that past for fund-raising. Many archives play an increasingly important role in development.

Instead of instituting comprehensive records management programs, the college and university archives in the survey are creating selective records management programs that fit their institutions. They are introducing records management techniques that are suitable to their particular situation and expanding the use of those techniques as funding permits. At the same time they are continuing the archival services and procedures that have been a part of their operation, many of which grow out of the historical manuscript tradition.

Adopting and Adapting Records Management Techniques

Among those institutions surveyed, college and university archivists do not adopt records management techniques to enhance administrative service and reference or to provide space saving and cost effectiveness—although these are important outcomes of such techniques. Rather they adopt and adapt selected records management techniques that will allow them to maintain more efficiently cultural facilities focusing on the preservation of records for research use.

In performing this cultural mission it is not necessary or advisable to wait until the archives is adequately supported to begin the adoption and adaptation of records management techniques. Rather, archives should begin with what is possible; adopt records management techniques suited to a specific situation and adapt them to specific circumstances.

Two steps should precede the implementation of any records management techniques: the development of a collecting policy and the assessment of the archives' gaps, weaknesses, and strengths in relation to the collecting policy. It may be that the collecting policy for college and university archives seems self-evident; they collect university records. But college and university archivists cannot, nor should they want to, accession all university records. They must collect selectively. In addition, a collecting policy helps archivists to be proactive. Most college and university archivists tend to be reactive—mostly because of understaffing. Too often they fill their stacks with records they are offered rather than records they should hold but need actively to seek.⁹ Assessing the gaps, weaknesses, and strengths is accomplished by reviewing the holdings in each of the collecting areas. Are all units represented? Are the holdings as current as possible? Are important records series represented?

Having reviewed current holdings and established a collecting policy, an archives often begins implementation with central administrative units. College and university archives are sometimes criticized because they have documented from the top down, but central administrative units are stable, usually well organized with decent filing systems, and are therefore conducive to thorough

documentation. Also beginning at the top offers important visibility for a job done right. As an alternative archives could choose one central administrative unit, one administrative unit from a college or school, one department, one campus-wide committee, one student organization, and one support unit as beginning points. The initial survey and accession could then become a model for each type of unit.

Surveys are the first step in any program. They should result not only in an initial accession, but in the periodic transfer of historically significant records series, and the destruction of series without permanent value. Ideally the generating unit should be advised about every records series it creates. The survey should identify records series that ought to remain in the unit until destruction and include recommendations for a destruction date. It should also identify series that should be transferred to records center storage, if it exists, until destruction, and series to be transferred to the archives. Recommendations about genres of records that must meet statutory or regulatory rules—such as financial records, student folders, or personnel files—should also be given.

It will be difficult for most college and university archives to administer a completely standardized records retention and disposition schedule; colleges and universities are decentralized and idiosyncratic institutions, whose administrators are moved as much by recommendation and persuasion as by directives from above. The traditional manuscript practices of personal contact and individual arrangements for survey and transfer may never be completely replaced by routinized and standardized schedules, however efficient.

Other records management techniques can be introduced within the limits of a program's capacity and modified to meet specific needs. Records center storage is generally proposed for the temporary storage of records scheduled for destruction, but it may be used for the off-site storage of records to be transferred to the archives at a later date, or the storage of archival records with lengthy closure dates. If an archives has the resources to transfer and store inactive records scheduled for destruction at a later date to a records center administered by the archives, it assures the timely destruction of the records and alleviates space problems in the transferring unit. Most archives, however, do not have those resources. As an alternative, an archives can use records center storage only for inactive records that the unit is not yet ready to release to the archives but that the archives ultimately wishes to have. By housing in a records center the records that have historical value but that cannot be immediately accessioned, an archives can increase the probability of their eventual formal transfer to the archives.

College and university archives may choose to develop a manual that covers the institution's records-related policies and the archival procedures and records management techniques used by the archives to carry out those policies. The importance of a manual cannot be overlooked. As records management techniques are extended, as more units' records are surveyed and retention and disposal recommendations are prepared, general guidelines or recommendations may be included in the manual. Information on general filing procedures that support efficient maintenance of active files and the transfer of inactive files should also be included in a manual. Specific boxing, labeling, and transfer directions will make the originating unit better able to prepare for transfer and make the transfer more efficient.

Conclusion

Most college and university archives will operate modestly funded programs for the foreseeable future. Archives with limited support may not be able to implement and maintain a comprehensive records management program, but selected records management techniques may enable such an archives to work more efficiently. A comprehensive records management program may not be a practical goal for many college and university archives, but the adoption and adaptation of records management techniques offers college and university archives their best chance of meeting the challenge of adequately documenting campus communities.

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NOTES

1. In 1987 Edwin C. Bridges, director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and Frank Burke, acting archivist of the United States, were asked by Francis X. Blouin, Jr., director of the Bentley Historical Library, to review the library's programs.
2. Based on techniques listed in Wilmer O. Maedke, Mary F. Robek, and Gerald F. Brown, *Information and Records Management* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Glencoe Press, 1974); and William Benedon, *Records Management* (Los Angeles: The Trident Shop, California State University, 1969).
3. Maynard Brichford, "Records Management: A General Introduction for Archivists," paper presented at the New England Archivists annual spring meeting, Hanover, New Hampshire, 28 April 1979, p.1.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. Board of Regents of the University of Michigan, "Bylaws of the Board of Regents," Sec 12.04, The Michigan Historical Collections (Ann Arbor: December 1985, updated July 1988), 70.
6. The Bentley Historical Library houses the Michigan Historical Collections, a manuscript collection documenting the State of Michigan and its peoples, and the University of Michigan archives.
7. The institutions surveyed were: Cornell University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Pennsylvania State University, Stanford University, University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin/Madison, Wayne State University, and Yale University.
8. William Saffady, "A University Archives and Records Management Program: Some Operational Guidelines," in *College and Research Libraries* (May 1974): 204-210, reprinted in *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979), 97-103.
9. See the section on collecting policy (page 3) in the very useful document prepared by the Subcommittee on Standards for the College and University Archives Committee of the Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for College and University Archives," approved by the full committee in Nashville, 3 October 1978. These standards relied heavily on the University of Wisconsin System Archives Council's, "Core Mission and Minimum Standards for University Archives in the University of Wisconsin System," 1977.