

# A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE RECORDS GRANT PROGRAM: THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON YOU!

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The new records grant program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission has authority to recommend grants to state and local governments and to nonprofit institutions for a wide variety of activities relating to the preservation and use of historical materials. Though the records program is still in its early stages, the Commission has already awarded a number of grants for projects throughout the country and will recommend a much larger number in fiscal year 1977. Governors in forty states and Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands have appointed State Historical Records Coordinators and, with the approval of the Commission, State Historical Records Advisory Boards.<sup>1</sup> Except for national and regional projects, the State Coordinator and Board serve as a planning and evaluation mechanism for proposals submitted under the records program.

Since this is a new program, its policies are not yet embedded in layers of precedent and its procedures are not considered sacred. This is, after all, your program, a program which should be developed to serve needs identified by archivists and historians and others involved in the administration and use of historical records. It is the Commission's intention to seek your advice, especially through the State Advisory Board mechanism -- but in other ways, too -- on how the most important problems may be addressed. The

records program should be a cooperative program in which a good deal of influence -- and initiative and responsibility -- resides outside of Washington.

The Commission hopes to develop an adaptive program aimed at meeting the major problems identified by those most involved in the care of historical records. Thus, our request is that archivists throughout the country begin with us to think about how together we can build and shape this program to serve real needs. Some might feel that spending a great deal of time thinking about the future of a program that is still so very modest is idle dreaming.<sup>2</sup> But dreaming is not what is needed from you or from the Commission and its staff. We all need to be realistic but we need not -- and in our common interest we should not -- unnecessarily restrict our vision.

While we cannot know at this point whether the records program will grow like Jack's beanstalk or at a much slower pace, we can agree that very little magic will be involved. This program will be useful in meeting needs which you define to the degree that you take an interest in it, influence it in directions you feel are most productive, criticize it when necessary, and support it when it deserves support. Let us then briefly consider the future of the historical records program and what might be accomplished.

First is the simple fact that an undetermined amount of money will be available in the form of federal grants to assist in a wide range of activities including the identification of historical records, their preservation, restoration, arrangement, description, and use; and to support projects which may improve the techniques and processes employed in the administration of these records. It is fair to say that the distribution of these funds will be determined, for the most part, by those of you involved in the administration of historical records.

By and large, those of you involved with historical records problems on a day-to-day basis will write the grant proposals, administer the projects, or assist, encourage, or direct others to do so. As members of State Historical Records Advisory Boards, as reviewers of regional or national proposals, as consultants, and as concerned professionals, it is your initiative and your advice through your individual and cooperative efforts which will chiefly influence the development of and support for records grant projects.

Beyond the simple fact of availability of new grant funds, there are potentially beneficial effects from the records program -- what economists might refer to as "spill-overs"-- which are worth considering from the outset.

For example, in many states the Historical Records Advisory Board marks the first time that a formal, or even an informal, vehicle has existed for discussion and action by a diverse, but hopefully reasonably representative, group of persons involved in the preservation and use of historical records within the state. This is not necessarily significant -- but it can be. And in several states it is already becoming so in several ways.

The Board can play an important role in identifying needs and indicating, as best it can, its own views of priorities. This may be helpful, not only to the Board itself in deciding which grant proposals to recommend to the NHPRC, and to the Commission in deciding among competing requests, but also to other funding and granting agencies, whether at the federal, state, or local level or in the private sector. As time goes by the Commission hopes that the priority lists which it has requested Advisory Boards to begin to establish will become more and more refined as a device for planning, decision making, and identifying progress -- or the lack of it.

Advisory Boards can also play a useful role in identifying areas in which cooperative proposals should be developed to deal with problems which cannot effectively be undertaken by one institution. Some such projects may even involve cooperation across state lines. And we can hope that Boards will play a catalytic role in bringing together appropriate institutions and organizations to carry out feasibility studies and develop administrative bases to implement such cooperative projects.

A third role that an Advisory Board might effectively play is to bring information regarding historical records needs to the attention of a variety of audiences so that the public becomes more aware of the importance of what the institutions you represent are trying to accomplish. This audience includes first of all the governor, members of the state administration, the bureaucracy, and the legislature. It includes officials of local governments who may not always be aware of the value of the materials for which they are responsible. It also includes higher level administrators in some of the institutions which employ you, such as universities, church groups, hospitals,

and libraries. Finally, this audience includes the press, and through it, specific individuals and groups as well as the general public.

It is not only to others that the Boards can, from time to time, provide useful information, but also to professional archivists, especially in cooperation with the Commission's staff. The following possibilities come to mind.

Archivists and manuscript curators, as professionals in other areas, all too frequently find themselves starting from scratch, reinventing the wheel over and over again, as they undertake a survey, guide, or special project. The Commission and the state Advisory Boards can, over time, become something of a clearinghouse for information regarding who is doing what, especially regarding new and large projects since they will often involve outside funding. In this way, we may be able to avoid some duplication of effort and share resources and techniques better than we have in the past.

The Advisory Boards, in cooperation with the Commission staff, may be able to build and share information about and develop relationships with sources of non-government support for historical records projects. How long the list will be and how effectively it can be used remains to be seen, but in nearly every state and major city there are sources of support which have not yet been identified or tapped. The Commission has already begun a survey to identify private foundations that will support records projects.

Finally, there may be times when news on the national scene needs to be communicated quickly to state governments and others within the states. The Advisory Board mechanism presents one vehicle for doing so. The Commission is able to quickly reach Advisory Board members who, in turn, may be in contact with others in the state on matters of general concern.

The Commission does not wish to appear naive or overly optimistic or to overstate the appropriate role of the Advisory Board. The Boards will develop differently from state to state, in part to suit the local situation and sometimes due to lack of foresight and effort. Not all Coordinators and Boards will be equally effective. Not all will be as representative of your interests as you and we would like, though the fact that one third of the Board turns over each year is a safety valve

in terms of representativeness. There is no reason you should not -- there may be good reason you should -- attempt to influence appointments to these Boards.

There is also one direct benefit from grant funds, a benefit which is not a spill-over from the State Advisory Board mechanism. The generation of outside funds, whether a grant, gift, or otherwise, has a way of strengthening the influence of those who acquire such funds. The reputation of the archivist whose efforts are primarily responsible for securing a grant grows; he or she may discover increased influence within the institution. The materials which are in his or her charge, especially those to be processed under grant funds, suddenly become more visible, more important. The announcement of a grant in the community at large strengthens the impression that the materials and those who administer them are worthy of attention and perhaps more attention than the community, government, or parent institution have given in the past. Again, we don't wish to overstate the case. Obtaining a grant won't stop the strong man at the beach from kicking sand in your face or improve your love life -- unless perhaps you do some things with the grant money not authorized in the grant letter. But archivists should not ignore the possibilities, should not be shy in making it known that others agree that what you are doing is worthy of support and in using that fact to build support for your program.

The Commission also hopes you will look especially closely at the possibility of using a NHPRC matching grant proposal as a lever in obtaining funds from other sources. If the records program fails to generate substantial new funds from the non-federal level, it will be weaker because of it, and therefore of less value to you in the long run. Matching funds make increased Congressional appropriations much easier to obtain. Matching money from sources in your own area fosters interest in and support for your own programs.

We might also think about some dangers, some practices to be avoided, some bad habits which can lead to a mediocre program. First, we need to avoid assuming that only the Coordinator and Board have responsibility for the success or failure of the records program. By and large, the Coordinator and Board will be as good as you expect them to be. They need your ideas, your support, your interest. They also need your criticism. They need to know you expect them to be responsible and responsive.

They need to hear from their professional colleagues.

Furthermore, we need to avoid the appearance or the reality of a closed system, of any sort of establishment. The records program is inclusive, not exclusive. Coordinators and Boards need to reach out with information, and assistance, to county and town clerks, to small historical societies, to people who do not ordinarily participate in professional organizations. Good will and cooperation and initiative are needed from these quarters if some of the most pressing needs are to be identified and dealt with, and if a broad base of support for this program is to develop.

Third, in evaluating proposals Board members need to avoid "passing the buck" to the state Coordinator, and the Board and Coordinator together need to avoid passing the buck to the Commission by failing to judge proposals rigorously. Weak proposals should, as often as possible, be identified at the state level and improved as much as possible before they are recommended for Commission review. It is hoped that Advisory Boards and others in the state will often assist, or identify others who might assist, in the development of proposals from institutions lacking personnel qualified to do so on their own. In the end, passing along potentially valuable but poorly thought-out proposals serves no one's interest. While the Commission staff will assist in this regard as much as possible, we are, and wish to remain, a very small staff relying heavily upon the advice of those of you closer to the scene.

Finally, we need to avoid the sort of institutional parochialism which says that a grant exclusively to our own institution is always to be preferred to sharing a grant with one or more other institutions, or preferable to a grant to an institution better situated than our own to carry out a project in which we have a deep interest. Almost all of us have scarce resources to apply to problems overwhelming in size and, often, in complexity. We need to build on the move toward cooperation and sharing which has begun to develop in recent years in many states and regions. The historical records program represents an opportunity to do so.

1. Missouri, Nebraska, and Wisconsin are the three states in the Midwest Archives Conference area from which nominations for the State Historical Records Advisory Board had not been received by NHPRC as of October 1, 1976. The Governor of Nebraska has informed the Commission that his state does not wish to participate in the records grant program. The Commission has approved appointments in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, and North Dakota, and contingently, South Dakota. Nominations from Kansas are under consideration.

2. The NHPRC has recently received an increase in its appropriation allowing \$1 million for records grants during FY 1977 which begins on October 1, 1976. Previously only a total of \$225,000 taken from the appropriation level which had existed in FY 74 and 75 for the publications program was made available for initial development of the records program. The Commission has made, through the September 1976 Commission meeting, seventeen records grants for a total of \$217,505. Five of these are "state" grants to institutions in the Midwest Archives Conference area. This does not include a "national" grant to the Society of American Archivists in Chicago. As of October 1, the Commission has already received over 100 new grant applications for review during FY 1977. Additional proposals are welcome.

Note: A pamphlet describing the records grant program and containing information about grant applications and procedures may be obtained by writing: Records Program, NHPRC, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. 20408 (phone 202-724-1616). A grant application cover sheet and information regarding State Coordinators and Advisory Boards is available from the same address.