

THE MODERN ARCHIVES INSTITUTE: A HISTORY AND PROFILE OF RECENT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: This paper briefly reviews the history and evolution of the Modern Archives Institute and its current goals and structure as a provider of post-appointment training. The profile of current students focuses on their current position, education, and other archival training, experience, staff size, institutional holdings, and major problems to develop a profile of attendees. The paper also examines the success of the Institute as a provider of continuing education. The paper closes with an overview of possible future changes for the Institute.

Since the mid-1930s, when the National Archives opened its doors and American archivists founded the Society of American Archivists (SAA), archival education has been an essential component in the efforts of archivists to define themselves. Many questions have been asked regarding archival education and many questions on the subject remain to be answered. Who should educate archivists? Where should archivists be educated? What are the essential components of a basic archival course offering? Should archival education be located in history departments, library schools, or independently? What is the most effective methodology—traditional academic coursework or practicums in the form of institutes and internships? Is pre- or post-appointment archival education more effective? The history and emphasis of the Modern Archives Institute in many ways reflects this continuing discussion and offers some answers to these questions.

The debate over archival education continues today. The SAA's Committee on Education and Professional Development (CEPD) recently adopted and promoted guidelines for a two year masters degree in archival studies. For CEPD the issue is decided. Traditional academic education, preferably pre-appointment, is the proper approach. Reliance on workshops, institutes, and post-appointment training is inadequate. The demand for such training, however, continues unabated. Both approaches have merit, both meet clear needs. This paper focuses on one of the most successful post-appointment delivery vehicles—the Modern Archives Institute.

In the summer of 1945, responding to a need for post-appointment archival training across the United States, Ernst Posner conducted the first Modern Archives Institute at the American University campus in Washington, DC. By

1992, seventy-one additional institutes had been conducted in the forty-seven years since that first session. Throughout its existence the Institute has been sponsored by the National Archives with continuous co-sponsorship by the Library of Congress. The Maryland Hall of Records also served as a co-sponsor until 1976. On three occasions since 1986 the Institute has been conducted outside of Washington, DC, with co-sponsorship by the Western Council of State Libraries (1986), the State Historical Society of Iowa (1988), and the Rocky Mountain Archivists (1992). All sessions outside Washington, DC, have been offered in late summer. Current plans call for regional sessions on an even year schedule.

The Modern Archives Institute served as the model for other continuing education archival programs across the United States, including the summer institute at the University of Denver with cooperation of the Colorado State Archives (begun in 1950 and since discontinued), the Georgia Institute, and, most recently, the Western Archives Institute, begun in 1986.¹

Over almost five decades the Institute has evolved in format, content, purpose, and sponsorship. Early institutes reflected their academic setting. They were four week offerings with academic lectures on archival topics, term papers, examinations, and supervised internships in the National Archives. Participants could receive academic credit.

By 1970 the Institute's focus had begun to evolve from Posner's emphasis on academic credit and pedagogy toward greater emphasis on the more practical needs of those seeking post-appointment training. The Institute moved from the American University campus to the National Archives shortly after Ernst Posner's retirement in 1961. While American University continued to offer academic credit to Institute participants, by 1975 less than forty percent of the students were opting for academic credit. Frank B. Evans, the Institute's director at that time, reflected that "with regard to post-appointment training, academic credit is neither essential nor commensurate with the costs."²

Throughout the seventies the Institute increasingly emphasized the practical needs of those seeking post-appointment training. The internship and the formal examinations, required of those seeking academic credit, were discontinued in 1965 in recognition of the time restraints on contemporary archivists and of the development of formal archival education courses in both history and library science programs across the continent. While the opportunity for obtaining academic credit continued through 1985, the number of participants selecting this option declined significantly. Since 1985 it has been the student's responsibility to arrange for academic credit. The Institute's director will certify participation.

Offered first as an annual summer institute between 1945 and 1971, the Institute has been offered twice each year in Washington, DC, in late January and mid June since 1972. Currently, it is an intense two week program of lectures on archival topics, reinforced with practical exercises, demonstrations, tours, and formal and informal discussions with practicing archivists. Topics covered include basic archival principles and concepts, appraisal, arrangement and description, reference and access, law, preservation, public programs, management, ethics, professional issues, fundraising and grantsmanship, all traditional concerns. The Institute also focuses on overviews of non-traditional records, including photographs, cartographic materials, and electronic records, and archival automation.

Another aspect of the emphasis on practical application above academic theory is the use of subject area experts as instructors. Each of the fifteen to twenty instructors are recognized experts in their field of archival endeavor. They are selected by the Institute directors for their ability to teach, in addition to their subject area expertise. This ability is measured by reputation, by observation of their classroom performance by the co-directors, and by student evaluations. Changes are made when necessary due to ineffectiveness, instructor "burn-out," and the need to ensure that other competent instructors are available when needed. The turnover rate, however, has been very low with only one or two instructors changing from session to session.

The directors and the instructors recognize and convey to the students that the wealth of archival theory, information, practice, and experience on any given topic cannot be covered fully in the amount of time available. The Institute's goal is to give participants a baseline of information upon which they can expand: a solid foundation of principles, concepts, and current practices supplemented with extensive readings, bibliography, and contact points to enable the participants to pursue any topic as their own need arises.

Between 1986 and 1992, 87% of the participants in the Modern Archives Institute worked in their institution's archives³; 54% were their institution's archivist and an additional 33% worked with the archivist for their institution (Figure 1). Only 12% were not archivists. Casual observation and conversation indicate most non-archivists supervised archivists and attended to gain a better understanding of the concepts and principles which guide their staff. At the regional Institute held in Denver, CO., in 1992 the percentage of participants who were archivists, 83% (compared to the overall average of 54%), reflects the demand for training in an area geographically distant from the three existing institutes.

The educational backgrounds of Institute participants is strikingly different from that of the broader profession. A growing number of participants have neither a history nor a library education (Figure 2). In 1970 30% of the Institute's

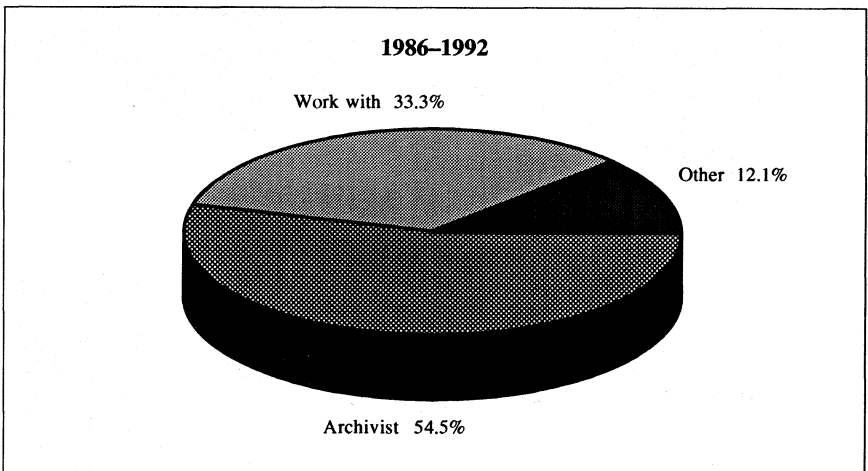


Figure 1
MAI Occupational Categories

participants had a history degree. For the period between 1986 and 1992 that number had fallen to 24%. This compares with 50% of those responding to the SAA 1990 continuing education survey who have one or more degrees in history (Figure 3). Similarly, in 1970 62% of those in the Institute had library science backgrounds. Currently only 12% have library degrees. Just over one-third (34%) of those responding to SAA's 1990 survey had an MLS.

Correspondingly, the percentage of Institute participants with "other" degrees has risen from 8% in 1970 to 30% between 1986-1992 (Figure 4). These include disciplines as diverse as English, Religious Studies, Archeology, Business, and Fashion Merchandising. This is nearly double the 16% of SAA's 1990 survey respondents who have other degrees. This trend reflects the increasing complexity of archival work. In response, many archival repositories have sought people with non-historical, non-library subject expertise to care for archival collections and meet the needs of their researchers. Another trend clearly evident in the participants' profiles is a sense of archives as a "growth field" in terms of employment. Archives also is seen as a desirable second career opportunity.

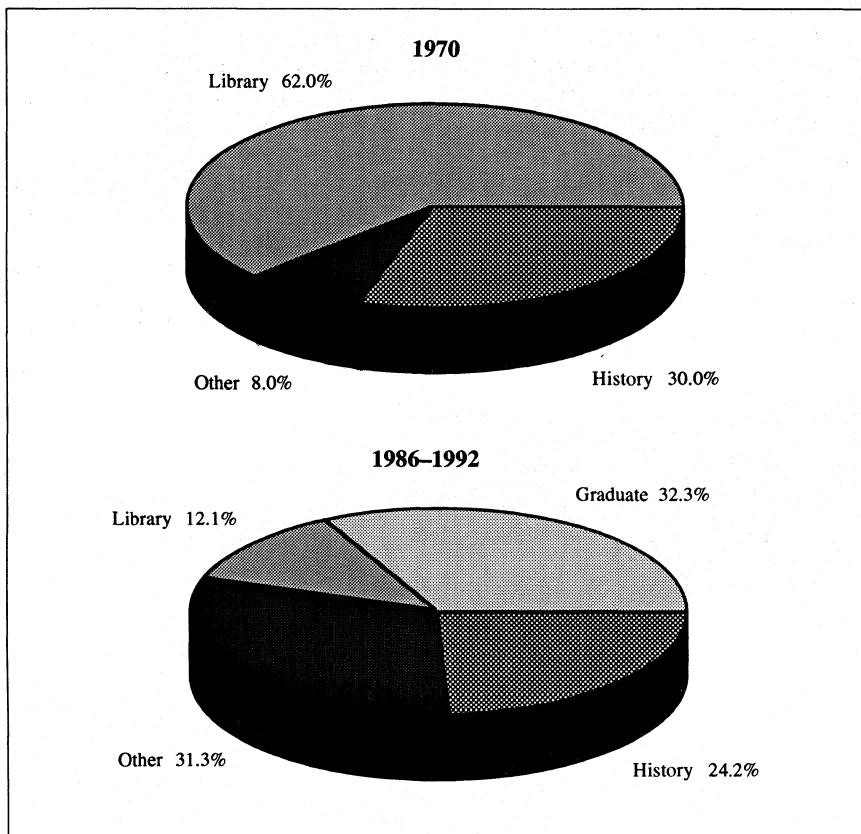


Figure 2.
MAI Education Backgrounds

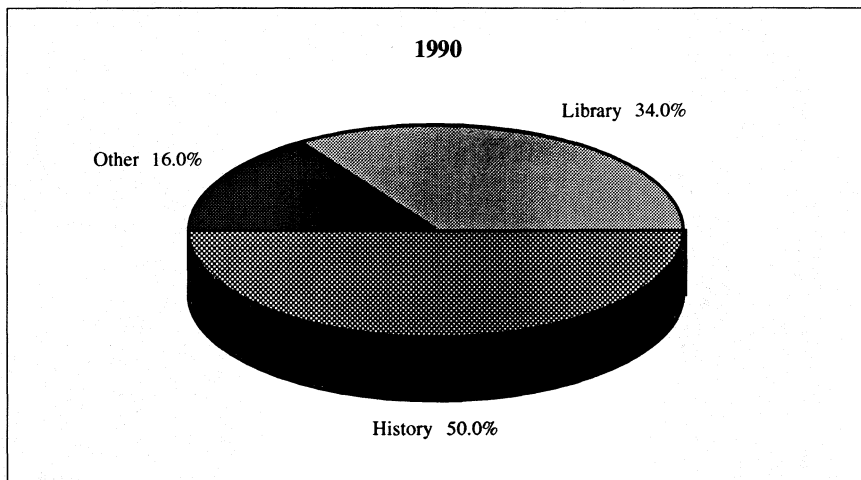


Figure 3
SAA Education Backgrounds

Since its inception in 1945 the Modern Archives Institute has been intended for newly appointed archivists. The Institute continues to serve this purpose (Figure 4). Nearly 45% of the participants between 1986 and 1992 had been on the job less than one year; 58% for less than two years. Overall, only 13% of the participants have more than 5 years experience, and that percentage has been declining with each session. The 1992 Institute session in Denver, with its strong regional emphasis, countered this trend—41% had more than five years experience. For the profession as a whole the 1989 SAA membership survey and the 1990 SAA continuing education survey (Figure 5) found slightly over 10% of the respondents having less than two years experience.

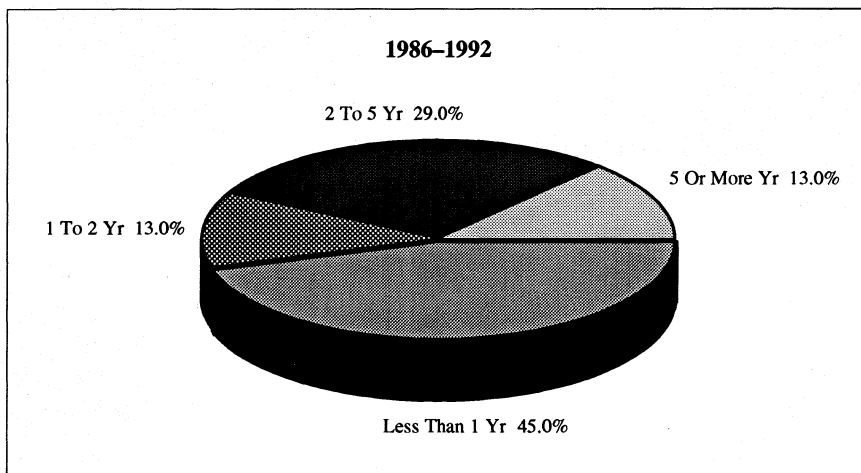


Figure 4
MAI Experience

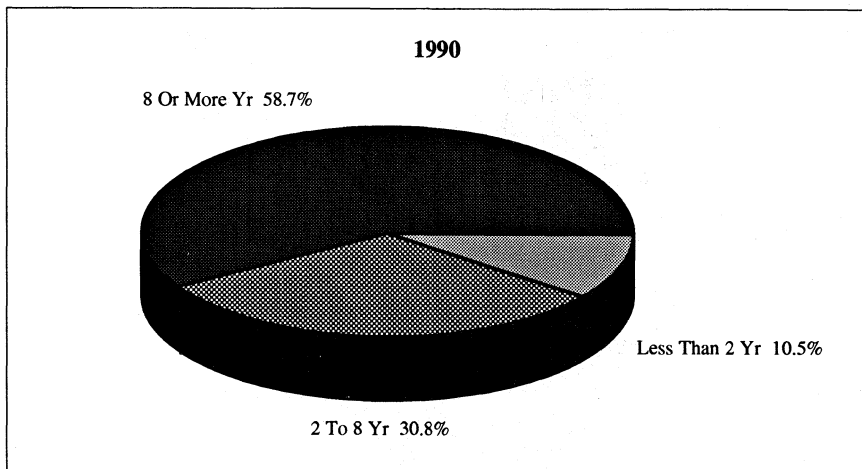


Figure 5
SAA Experience

The Modern Archives Institute also was established to provide archival training for newly appointed practicing archivists who work in small institutions and thus have few, if any, alternate training opportunities, especially within their own institution. Just under one-half (48%) of all attendees between 1986 and 1992 came from institutions with two or fewer full time staff (Figure 6). Fully three-fourths of the participants come from institutions with five or fewer full time staff. The Library of Congress, the Institute's co-sponsor, sends two or more staff members to each session accounting for at least 10% of the remaining 25% who come from larger institutions.

The profile of recent Institute participants does reflect the broader archival community in one significant aspect—the volume of records Institute partici-

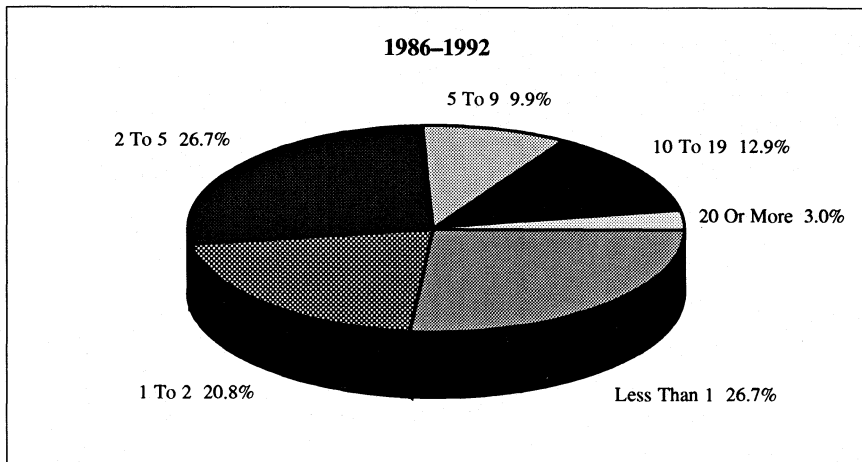


Figure 6
MAI Staff Size

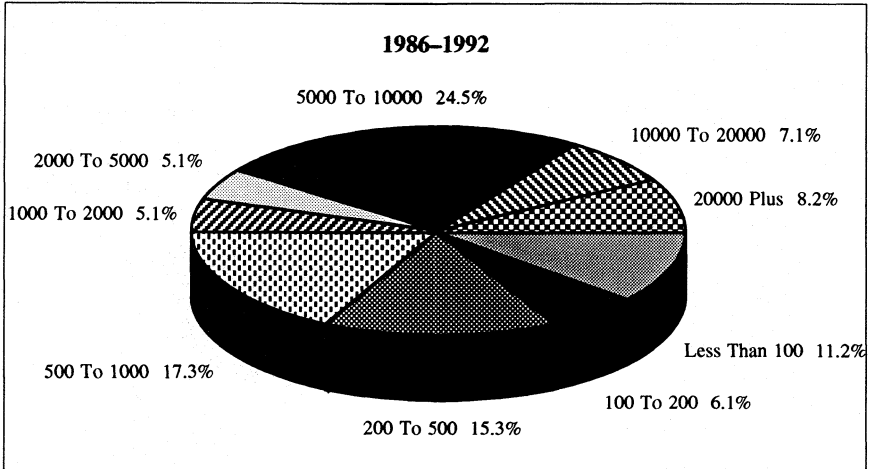


Figure 7
MAI Volume of Holdings

participants are responsible for is similar to that of the profession at large (Figure 7). One-third (32%) of those participants responding work in institutions with less than 500 linear feet of archival material. An additional 27% are in institutions with between 500 and 2000 linear feet. This means that fully three-fifths of the participants are responsible for relatively small collections of less than 2000 linear feet. Conversely, excluding participants from the Library of Congress, only 5% are responsible for holdings which exceed 10,000 linear feet.

The nature of these archival holdings of Institute participants also is as varied as it is for the broader archival community. One-fifth (21%) of the respondents are responsible exclusively for the records of their own institution (Figure 8). For another one-third (35%), more than 80% of their holdings came from only

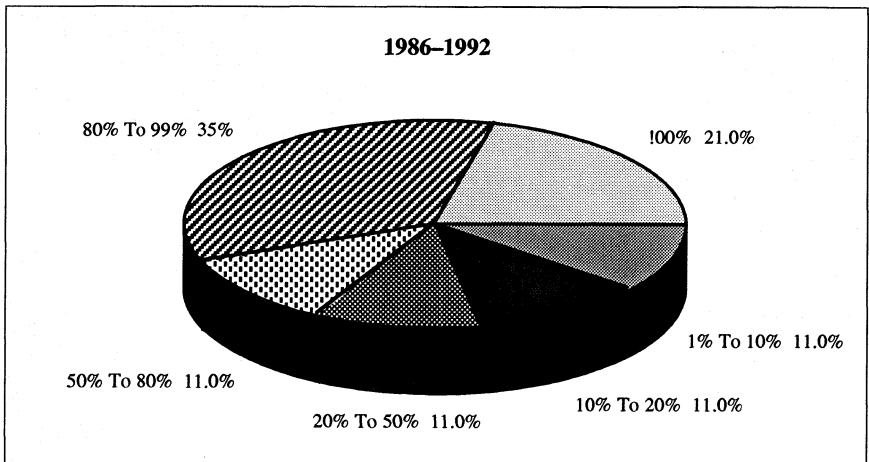


Figure 8
MAI Institutional Archives

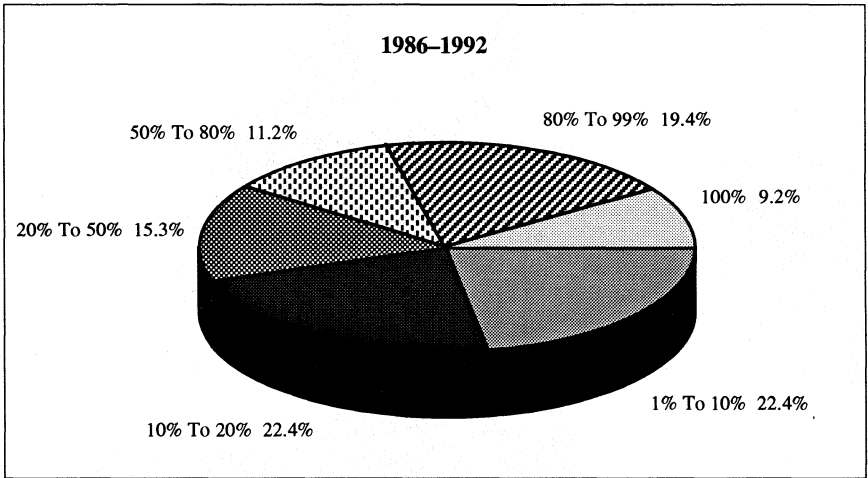


Figure 9
MAI Personal Papers and Collections

their own institution. On the opposite end of the spectrum, only 9% of the respondents were from repositories where all of the holdings were personal papers or collected archives (Figure 9). Another one-fifth (19%) had collected 80% or more of their collections from outside sources.

When asked to address the “major problem you or your institution face,” the answers given by Institute participants between 1986 and 1992 parallel those faced by all archivists and manuscript curators. No single issue was given by more than one-fifth of the respondents (Figure 10). The problems, in descending order of importance, were: ineffective management, insufficient time for the duties assigned, insufficient resources, lack of experience and training, issues relating to appraisal and acquisition, the ever present backlog, unsatisfactory

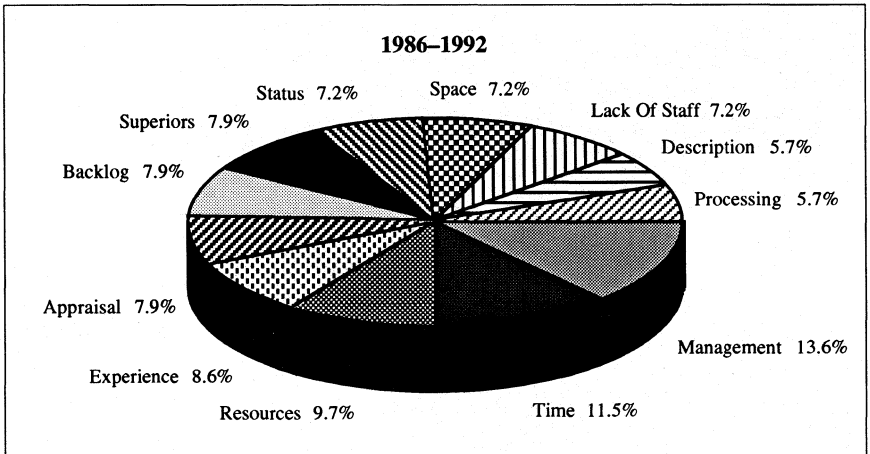


Figure 10
MAI Problems Facing Archives

relations with superiors—especially outside of or above the archives, the low status or lack of visibility of the archives, the lack of space, the lack of staff, and issues relating to description of records. The larger archival community is familiar with each of these issues.

Participants also were asked to indicate what they hoped to gain from the Modern Archives Institute. Responses indicated they were looking for a thorough presentation of the basic issues, practices, procedures, and terminology; and for the opportunity to gain practical solutions to current problems and issues. The Institute meets these needs by providing competent instruction by practicing archivists; by facilitating personal contacts and the opportunity to establish a “network” of archivists they could contact in the future; by stimulating discussion of unresolved professional issues; and by increasing their confidence, reassuring most of them that their current methods and practices conform with the mainstream of archival practice.

Post-appointment archival training can learn a great deal from the broader profession of continuing education. Comments solicited from Institute participants on the strong and weak points of their two week experience highlight this. Participants stress the need for even more practical information, for tours and other kinds of “show-and-tell,” for hands-on exercises, interactive dialogues and question-and-answer sessions to break up or replace the academic lectures. Consequently, instructors emphasize practice which illustrates theory; they illustrate archival principle through real life examples and exercises which demonstrate “how to” and which the participants can relate to their own work.

The Institute has benefited from the perspective of continuing education, especially adult learning. The co-directors and instructors know that no single session should last too long. Frequent breaks and extended lunches are scheduled. Instructors emphasize meaningful information with direct relevance to current situations. The emphasis is on information, sources and contents which will assist the participants when they might face an issue in the future.

The Modern Archives Institute began as an academically based course in an era when virtually no academically based course or extended workshop existed. As college and university based archival education courses and multiple course sequences developed across the United States and Canada between 1945 and 1975, the Institute evolved more properly into a post-appointment training program.

The Institute’s co-directors and their management team continually review the Institute. The Institute session held in June 1993 was the first to confer Continuing Education Units (CEUs) to all participants. This reflects both the changing role of the Institute and the changing needs of the participants.

A second area of reassessment should be offering additional, special focus sessions of one or two week duration, possibly within the Modern Archives Institute structure. Some advanced or special focus sessions which have been suggested include electronic records, preservation, photographs, managing cultural institutions, appraisal, outreach, and fundraising, all areas in which the staff, facilities, and programs of the National Archives and the Library of Congress are recognized as among the best.

A third area of consideration is additional regional offerings of the Modern Archives Institute. The three offered to date have been very successful. They have provided basic training in parts of the country far from any of the three

existing institutes. They have taken the training where it is needed, where the cost to the participants may be less than if they had to travel to Washington, DC. As travel and lodging costs increase, the Institute has seen an increasing percentage of its attendees come from the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Over the past fifteen years 21 percent of the attendees were employed by federal agencies in the metropolitan area; another 15 percent by other repositories in the metropolitan area. These attendees have access to graduate level courses in archives at four universities in Washington and its suburbs, including the joint History-Information and Library Science master's program at the University of Maryland. Access to information, training, and practical exposure to techniques during the workday appears to be more important than academic credit.

The guidelines for regional sessions, by focusing on site, co-sponsor, faculty, and content, ensure equity, often with a majority of the same instructors used in Washington, DC. Present staffing permits one regional session every two years. The National Archives intends to conduct regional sessions in various parts of the country to provide easier access to the Institute. One shortcoming of regional offerings, however, is that they do not expose participants to the holdings, staff, and activities within the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and other archival facilities in the Washington, DC area.

If future reassessments provide for advanced archival training, it then would be appropriate for the co-directors to reexamine the content of the present Institute. The result might be to remove some topics which are more appropriate for the advanced sessions, such as electronic records or management. This would allow more time for instruction in other topics which presently are given less time than may be desired to provide adequate development of the topic and more time for student questions. This clearly would respond to participant complaints that many topics are given inadequate time.

The Modern Archives Institute continues to fulfill its primary mission of providing post-appointment training for inexperienced archivists, particularly from small institutions with small collections and small staffs with no organized internal training program. The Institute may modify the content of its basic course and may offer additional advanced courses in the future, but no plans exist to abandon this basic task of providing quality post-appointment training at a very reasonable cost.

Together, the Georgia Institute, the Western Archives Institute, and the Modern Archives Institute provide archival training to more than one hundred practicing archivists each year. This number represents a significant portion of all archival education. Such post-appointment training programs remain an essential part of archival education. Combined with other forms of continuing education such as workshops, formal presentations at conferences, seminars, and in-house training, institutes provide a vital part of archival education. They will continue to play an essential role in archival education even after Masters in Archival Education programs are flourishing across the continent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Bruce Ambacher joined the staff of the National Archives in 1976. His career includes service in units dealing with electronic records, administration, and computer systems coordination. Currently he serves as Special Assistant to the Director of NARA's Center for Electronic Records. Between 1990 and 1992 he also served as co-director of the Modern Archives Institute. Dr. Ambacher is an adjunct instructor of history at George Mason University where he teaches a graduate course on the administration of archives and manuscripts.

NOTES

1. Frank B. Evans, "Preliminary Study for a National Archives Training Institute," December 1973. Frank B. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," *American Archivist* 40:1 (January 1977): 70.
2. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," 59.
3. The profiles are based on information gathered for ten of the thirteen institutes from 1986 through 1992. More than 285 participants completed individual profiles with information on their job role, education, personal experience, size of staff and holdings, major problems or issues they faced, whether archives is a first or subsequent career choice and whether they are members of professional archival associations. This profile, supplemented with data from the Lists of Attendees 1979-1993, the SAA 1989 membership survey, the SAA 1990 continuing education survey, and the Academy of Certified Archivists 1991 profile, serves as the basis for the statistics presented in this article.

