ARCHIVAL MISSION AND USER STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: User studies provide archivists with a useful tool for internal planning and analysis, but they are less reliable when used to justify programs to authorities outside the archives. They should be based on a well-defined sense of institutional mission rather than serving as the basis from which to create such purpose. User studies are normally limited to reference services, implying that reference is the primary function of an archives. Although such a definition may be more appropriate for manuscript repositories, it places government archivists at a serious disadvantage and devalues archival functions other than reference. Appraisal and disposition of records are the key activities, and any definition of use should reflect such activity. The author uses examples from his experience at the Illinois State Archives to demonstrate the futility of developing programs in response to perceived needs based on studies of existing patterns of use. The key to user studies in a governmental context is to broaden the definition of use to include all areas in which the archives acts so as to reflect the governmental as well as the cultural function that the archives serves. This can provide the basis for embedding the archives in the processes of government so that standard operations are automatically funded.

Archivists and manuscript curators are giving increased attention to the use of their holdings and are engaging in user studies. These studies have their greatest value in providing an archives with a method for self-examination and self-diagnosis. If performed dispassionately, the results can be useful for planning and for allocating resources. However, these methods should be combined with a well-defined sense of institutional mission, and should not be used to seek or create such purpose. User studies are most effective when they are limited to internal planning and analysis, and become less reliable when they are used to justify programs to authorities outside the archives. In fact, the process of program justification can be deceptive. While persuasive arguments can indeed be made on the basis of user studies, persuasive arguments can be made on many other grounds as well. In many instances, such justifications are more a formality than a reality.

User studies have traditionally focused on research use* of holdings. William Maher's article in this issue of *The Midwestern Archivist* makes explicit an assumption that is tacitly shared with other discussions of the role of user

*"Research use" and "reference use" are employed interchangeably in this paper.

studies. Maher distinguishes between research use and other types of service provided by an archives, and excludes these services from the scope of user studies. He states that "use is the retrieval of information from archival and manuscript holdings, finding aids, reference tools, and staff memories, in other words, reference services."[1] This definition is far too limiting for a government records repository.

For example, every time an archives accessions records from an agency, use occurs. It occurs because the archives has acted on records. This use is far less related to the extraction of information from those records than is research use, but it is no less real. Every time an archives refuses to accession records, or approves their destruction, use occurs. The archives is being used at a fundamental level, one which does not require an elaborate panoply of finding aids, but one which does require the highest professional qualities from the archivist. In simplest terms, use of an archives is not limited to an operation designed to satisfy people who come in to look at records.

Hilary Jenkinson expressed this in his *Manual of Archive Administration*, when he wrote: "Archives were not drawn up in the interest of or for the information of Posterity." He went on to add:

> The duties of the Archivist . . . are primary and secondary. In the first place he has to take all possible precautions for the safeguarding of his Archives and for their custody . . . subject to the discharge of his duties he has in the second place to provide to the best of his ability for the needs of historians and research workers. But the positions of primary and secondary must not be reversed.[2]

The tendency in American practice is to reverse Jenkinson's priorities, and the result has been to confuse what little sense of identity members of this profession have. When research use is viewed as the primary function of an archives, then an archives is only as important as this function, and this is simply not true. By insisting on a definition of use which is limited to reference services, archivists needlessly limit themselves. Those archivists who are responsible for government records place themselves at a serious disadvantage.

If the books in a library do not get used, they may well decline in value. It is not quite the same with an archives. It is entirely conceivable that a record in the custody of an archives is rarely, if ever, used, and yet the clear responsibility of the archives is to preserve that record without regard for the occurrence of use. If the same record were accessioned on the basis of anticipated research use, and then that use did not occur, the record would decline in value. Much is bound up in the appraisal process, because appraisal is the primary means by which an archives acts.

This does not apply as strongly or as clearly to manuscripts repositories. Here Jenkinson's priorities may well be reversed without damage, because, even though it is a truism, archives and manuscripts really are different. These differences have been blurred in practice by a poorly articulated consensus which has fastened on shared techniques as the means by which this profession is defined. The issue of user studies reveals the importance of drawing a distinction between the two fields. The contention that research use is the raison d'etre of manuscripts repositories may well be true. However, use in this narrow sense is not the fundamental purpose of an archives. Use in the more generous sense

is. The single key activity which can be performed by an archives is establishing the disposition of a record. This ultimately determines research use, because when appraisal and disposition are flawed, everything which succeeds them is flawed. Disposition is the nexus which joins records creator, archivist, and research user. Determination of this disposition is a responsibility that properly belongs to an archives. The emphasis on reference use as the dominant factor in an archives program is symptomatic of the failure, or the refusal, of archivists to acknowledge that the responsibilities of archivists and the activities which take place in an archives are part of a continuum. To shatter this continuum does no good. To seek validation for an archives program in reference use devalues the other major activities and functions of an archives.

What does a broader definition of use mean that archivists should do? How does it relate to user studies? Archivists should begin to keep information on all the various functions of an archives. When put together, these should provide at least a rough composite picture of how the entire institution is used. It is especially important for a government archives to keep track of all contacts with agencies. It is vital to learn which agencies participate in archives programs and why they do so. This participation makes them users, just as the people who enter the reading room of the archives are users.

Many of the same questions that would be asked in a study of reference use need to be asked in this expanded context. The essential question, however, is how is an archives used? This may be followed by a host of other questions, such as: Who are the users? With which agencies does the archives have regular contact? Which agencies remain aloof or uncooperative? Are agencies exclusively concerned with retention schedules? Is the archives being used as a dump for records not important enough to keep in office space but which the agency lacks the will to destroy? Who decides what the disposition of a record will be? What role does records management play? If records management is separate from the archives, how well do the two cooperate? Is space in the archives being occupied by records of high value? low value? no value? What role does the archives play vis-a-vis its constituents? Does the archives serve any educational function, training students in archival practice? Does the archives train people with responsibility for records to be better custodians? All of these areas of activity, and more, can fairly be considered to be areas of use, and can be examined objectively.

One reason for this barrage of questions is to reinforce the thesis that most of what is done in an archives is immediately use-oriented. To narrow the vision of this to include only reference users is to embrace an unnecessary handicap and to shortchange the remainder of an archives operation. Much of the reason for this has been the fact that the tasks that have been stressed by this profession are post-accession activities — arrangement, description, restoration, reference, access, information exchange — which are directed toward reference. In government records, many of the pre-accession duties of archivists have been taken over by, or abandoned to, records managers. The remaining custodial function is not one which archivists find wholly fulfilling. Perhaps it smacks too much of janitorial duties. Consequently, archivists look for activities that will be more congruent with their academic training.

Studies of reference use can have serious limitations when misconceptions enter the planning process. Only after the fact do events seem to follow the

kind of clear, linear trajectory that lends itself to analysis and intervention. In a general sense, the point of user studies is to help an archives develop an atmosphere of realism on the part of the staff, to teach it to cope with situations as they are rather than as they might be or as one would like them to be. It does little good to develop programs for groups of users who aren't going to appear. In different ways, to different degrees, archives and manuscripts repositories are defined by their users. Definition produced by reference use is more important for manuscripts repositories than it is for archives. User studies will and should identify users and the records being used. Consequently, these studies can help an administrator bring into focus that part of an institution's identity which is shaped by reference use. If the resulting portrait is unsatisfactory, user studies can provide some of the information necessary to begin to reshape an identity.

An example of how this works can be drawn from the experience of the Illinois State Archives. Ten years ago, use statistics at this institution revealed that use was heavily governmental. By itself, this information means very little. A number of reasons, such as the Archives' separation from academic and population centers, worked to reinforce this tendency. Many would argue that use of a state archives should be predominantly governmental. In this case, however, additional study revealed deficiencies in the elements of the program that were directed at the public. Consequently, leadership at the archives began to redirect reference services toward the public. This whole analysis was combined with the judgment that domination of the reference function by government was not desirable. Within a few years, the archives had registered a heavy increase in use by the public. In fact, use had become preponderantly public, without losing the absolute numbers of governmental users. On the surface, then, this illustrates an archival success story. It demonstrates how a review of user statistics enabled an archives to detect an imbalance in its reference program and then to proceed to correct it. It should be noted, however, that the preconception going into this whole effort was that a state archives should do more than governmental reference; that in fact, a state archives should be a research institution.

This example becomes more interesting when an analysis of available user statistics shows how the perceived imbalance was corrected. The large numbers that were added to the public use column came from virtually a single source: genealogists. Other sources of public use remained dormant. In other words, no scholars came in to use the holdings of the Illinois State Archives. By this yardstick, the Archives did not become a genuine research institution. Moreover, the large numbers of genealogists who used the Archives busied themselves with a handful of resources. Most important were the U.S. census, state censuses, military and veterans' records, and a massive card index of names. The bulk of the 75,000 cubic feet of records in the custody of the State Archives remained untouched. The two resources most in demand, the U.S. census and the name index, were not properly Illinois government records at all. By making these available, reference was filling a convenience function.

The bleakest aspect of the illustration just sketched is that it suggests strongly that some of the weaknesses revealed by user analysis may simply be outside an institution's control. It is fair to say that for several years, until staff disillusionment became pervasive, the State Archives put a premium on academic

users and saw them as somehow within reach. Because of this perception, it addressed a major portion of its program efforts to this constituency, in the hope that if it just hit on the right tactics, these users would be drawn to its holdings. To proceed with this example, in 1978 the State Archives published *A Descriptive Inventory of the Archives of the State of Illinois,* a major descriptive guide to the records in its custody. This guide was designed for the so-called serious researcher, not for the amateur or genealogist. An extensive subject index was developed and appended to the guide. Several hundred copies were distributed. The response to this guide can only be characterized as disappointing.

Would a more carefully constructed and deliberate user study have changed the direction the Archives took? It is unlikely. Even if the Archives could have foreseen in some way that this guide would not work as a device to attract a new and different type of user (and sustained contact with scholars prior to construction of the guide indicated precisely the opposite), even given this level of recognition, the guide project served too many purposes to jettison. Perhaps the question *how* one comes to use an archives should have been asked, but an answer might not have been forthcoming. It is unlikely that the best user analysis, performed before the fact, would have tipped anyone off. In other words, the Archives became involved in a situation where user studies were of little help, yet it was a user-oriented situation.

At roughly the same time that the guide project was under way, the Archives launched the Illinois Regional Archives Depository system (IRAD) to provide for local records with permanent value. One anticipated benefit of the system was the increased scholarly use that would accrue from housing these records on university campuses, where faculty and students would have only to make their way across campus to the library. The results were dismal. The bulk of the system's users are and have been genealogists. With the exception of a few instructors who routinely run their classes through a depository, academic use is hardly worth registering.

The point of this is not to carp about scholarly users of public records, but rather, to get at an area that is not always clearly understood to be closely allied with user studies at the outset of such activities. The two programs just mentioned, the guide and the IRAD system, were based in large part on a *perception* of the Illinois State Archives as a certain type of institution. Because it wanted to translate this perception into reality, and had the resources to complete its side of the bargain, the Archives needed to find serious researchers to complete itself. When the Archives sought these users, it failed to find them. The user analysis that was performed only reinforced the direction that was taken. It was quite clear, after studying the numbers, that not very many scholars were using the Archives. It was also clear, after studying the holdings of the Archives, that substantial and significant research could be done with these holdings. That being the case, the Archives made the conscious decision to go after scholars.

It would not have been satisfactory for the Archives to have said: "genealogists are easy to please and exist in large numbers, therefore we shall become a genealogical reference operation." If anything, it would have been even more depressing than the failure to draw scholarly users, because nothing more clearly reveals the bifurcated role a government archives must play than an analysis of the resources used by genealogists coupled with a composite view

of those holdings *not* used by genealogists. The disparity between number of users and number of holdings used is striking and disturbing.

Examination of another example of applied user analysis yields a slightly more encouraging result. Before the Illinois State Archives realized that the bulk of its public users were and will remain genealogists, it proposed to convert its public domain land sale records to machine-readable form. The Archives realized that this would create an informational resource with enormous scholarly research potential. As the conversion project developed, it became evident that initial projections of its scale and the length of time necessary to complete it were too low. Little demand for this resource came forth from the scholars for whom it had been designed, and it became apparent that they would represent, at best, a miniscule part of the project's beneficiaries. Genealogical users could provide the numbers necessary to justify completion of this massive project. This reflects what eventually happened. Genealogists dominate the users of this file of 550,000 names, while other groups use it infrequently, if at all. If the Archives had not been able to point to this very real constituency, it would have encountered difficulties in seeing the project through to completion. This project could not have been undertaken exclusively for genealogists, yet it would have been difficult to continue to pour resources into it without their presence.

These examples reinforce the notion that user studies *are* important. Only by performing them can one get a reliable picture of one's reference function. However, they also reveal that user studies *do* have limits. It is not always possible to accomplish all of one's goals. User studies are neutral in this respect. They yield information about situations, but they do not give directions for future program development. Even more important, in taking the results of a study and developing a plan of action, a host of preconceptions that might not always be evident enter the equation. These preconceptions become dangerous if they are not identified early on.

Is it wise to point to user studies when asked what an archivist does? Only if the definitions they provide are comfortable ones. Such responses could be grim, especially for those who work with government records. Here, a statement could be reduced to: "We serve government employees and genealogists." Those are the users; that's what archives are, reference services for persons tracing their ancestors and a kind of adjunct to agency files. Who has the stomach for this? More to the point, would this be an accurate description? It would be accurate only for those who are willing to limit their sense of identity and purpose to what can be derived from reference use.

A serious problem with using reference as the linchpin for a public records program is the fact that reference veers toward a cultural, rather than governmental, mission. However, a government archives is a part of government and exists to be of use to its government. The cultural functions of such an institution, although important and even fundamental, do not lend themselves to competition for resources in a government environment. How can they? How can historical studies be placed on a plane with programs for the elderly, for highways, or against crime and child abuse?

The answer is painfully obvious. If an archives chooses to place its cultural function first, it cannot expect to compete for resources with such programs. A program with purely cultural objectives that functions in a governmental

milieu will be far down the list of priorities. In reality, the competition for resources is what discussions of user studies are all about. Reference use would not be perceived to be so important if archives were not constantly having to struggle for subsistence levels of resources. Studies of reference use can and should make one's reference operation tighter and more suited to real demands for information, rather than imaginary ones. Such studies can substantially strengthen a manuscripts repository's position when it is time to negotiate for operating money. The situation is more complex when it comes to government archives. In a crude way, absolute numbers of users can have some immediate impact on the authorities who allocate resources, especially if those authorities are elected and if the archives is a substantial part of their domain. This is a capricious situation, however; most likely, any justification will suffice when money is available, and when it's not, the best justification in the world won't be good enough.

This doesn't mean that user studies should be ignored or abandoned. For one thing, they are a powerful aid to more efficient reference programs. The key to use, and to user studies in a governmental context, is to broaden the definition of use, to explore the areas in which the archives acts, to study each area from the perspective of use. The goal is to embed one's institution in the processes of government, to make it a natural part of these processes, so that standard operations are automatically funded. Focusing on reference use alone will not do this. For this reason disposition, rather than reference, is the elemental function in a public records environment.

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FOOTNOTES

1. William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *The Midwestern Archivist* 11:1 (1986) 15-26.
2. Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, reissue of rev. 2nd ed., (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1965), pp. 11, 15.