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Dancing: Archival Education and Student Research

Richard J. Cox

Dance Naked: Introduction

John Mellencamp's song "Dance Naked" might seem an inappropriate way of introducing four student essays on archival topics, but it happened to be what I was listening to as I put the finishing touches to this essay. As with most popular song lyrics (and I am not repeating Mellencamp's words so as not to offend anyone), these words can be interpreted on a number of levels. Yet, I know that when students work on such essays in their archives courses that they both feel naked in their lack of security about their own knowledge of archival science while sensing a similar nakedness in an archival literature marked by great strengths and greater weaknesses. At the least, they are dancing round and round with the archival literature and with new concepts in an effort to prepare themselves to be competent professionals.
In this introduction, I have tried to set the efforts of these particular student essays into their educational setting, profession-wide and in the particular school (the University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science) in which the students studied. These are important and stimulating essays, and I hope the profession sees them in that fashion. They are representative of a new generation of archivists being educated in new, more comprehensive education programs. The work of such young professionals bodes well for the future of our profession and, especially, our professional literature.

The Archives Education Shuffle

When archivists pause to reflect on what they think archivists ought to know to be competent, there are many options presented; the options generally continue old debates. Archivists should be grounded in archival principles and practices, the degree of balance between theory and practice varying according to who is reflecting on this issue. They should have an inter-disciplinary orientation, both for acquiring a knowledge of the records archivists appraise and manage and for working with the diversity of researchers using archival records. It would be nice, as well, if these archivists possessed a substantial knowledge about electronic recordkeeping technology and automated approaches and subject expertise relating to their holdings and the users of these records. Archivists must have excellent writing and communication skills, the ability to work with people, and even the physical ability to move the records from storage to the reference room. It is
obvious, of course, that such competencies can be seen much as the old apples and oranges equation, but there is no doubt that this discipline has both high expectations and often conflicting opinions regarding its practitioners.

What would the profession expect an archival educator to add to this discussion and debate? The educator will stress, of course, the need for the student to master the body of archival knowledge, as well as to have the ability to relate that knowledge to practical situations. Terry Eastwood, Luciana Duranti, and Tom Nesmith have written masterful essays that stress these matters, conveying the nature of the relationship between theory, methodology, and practice, and providing an excellent sense of what the archival knowledge is and what it needs to become, while, and this is important, describing different means by which archivists would be educated.¹ But there is more even than this that must be present in the archival academy and which the educator must convey to his or her students. Learning principles also includes the need for the fledgling archivists to have some sense of when and how to apply the principles that add up to form the archival body of

knowledge. This is not an argument for the importance of the practicum or fieldwork component in graduate archival education, but it is rather the need to equip archival students with the tools that enable them to understand applied research and to develop problem-solving skills. These students must be given the big picture (the whys) along with the basic tools (the whats and hows), and their knowledge -- however raw and unformed -- must be built on being able to test assumptions, to consider new approaches, and to pose and answer new questions that will enable them to be more effective archivists. In short, archivists should now be defined by not where they work (an archives) or their job titles (archivist) but by what they know (archival science). They are prepared to pursue careers, not to be plugged into assembly-line operations with short-lived skills.

What should be the educational objectives of our newly forming graduate educational programs? As an educator, I can identify six objectives. Educators should understand and teach the foundational theories of the field, such as provenance, that reflect principles about the nature of records and recordkeeping systems. They must introduce students to methodologies, techniques for managing or controlling records, such as the archival documentation strategy. Educators must orient students to the basic practices of the field, the essential skills for managing archival records and archival programs. Admittedly, how theory, methodology, and practice are intertwined depends both on the specific topic as well as the duration and comprehensiveness of the graduate program, but there is no argument that all three are crucial to the effectiveness of
the particular archivist and the profession. Educators must socialize the student to the profession, meaning that they need to have some understanding of the profession’s infrastructure of repository type, associations, professional debates, and continuing and emerging trends; we are providing a road map to help our graduates navigate until they learn their own way (or at least to read the map on their own).

Educators must introduce students to the nature of and needs for research in the field, so that these students can be prepared to carry out applied research in their workplaces as needed and to be able to evaluate other research necessary to making decisions. Finally, educators need to help their fledgling archivists understand that the field is changing and to help them comprehend both how they must react to change and to be change-agents. The archival mission in the modern Information Age is enough to help us comprehend this need. For too long archivists reacted to electronic information technology as obstacle rather than opportunity, and the results have been predictably messy.²

In this discussion, I have been emphasizing that we need to overthrow some basic assumptions about our field.

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² For my own thoughts on this, see Richard J. Cox, The First Generation of Electronic Records Archivists in the United States, 1960-1990: A Study in Professionalization (New York: Haworth, 1994). Things have shifted quickly in the short time since I have written this study, but the shift has still not affected the greater elements of the American archival community which are continuing to view the information technology as problem rather than as opportunity to convey the essential aspects of the archival mission. A major reason for this problem has been the weakness of graduate archival education.
We are no longer able to state confidently (if we ever were) that the archival practitioner is made by engaging in practice. Practice only provides an orientation to the level of knowledge in one particular archival program; if the student is fortunate, the knowledge level is high. We are now beginning to realize that practice is based on knowledge comprising both theory and methodology. There is more. We are also displaying a sense that we are not interested in training that stresses learning present practice. We are, instead, concerned with education that emphasizes an archival knowledge consisting of theory and methodology and their practical manifestations. There is, of course, a considerable difference in these approaches and their attitudes. If there is to be training, it comes in continuing education that is best built on a substantial archival education and basic knowledge.

What is the evidence of such a change in the archival profession's orientation to the education of its practitioners? We have more academic-based educators, and while they are still a relatively small group, it is a group far larger in size and influence than anyone would have predicted a decade ago. These educators are developing a more substantial graduate curriculum. I predict that the "program" of an introductory and advanced or specialized course melded to fieldwork will disappear as recognized means to educate archivists; they might exist to train technicians and other support staff, but they will not be seen as satisfactory for educating archivists.

Other indicators abound. We have had an explosion in archival publication that is adding research monographs to an already long list of basic primers; students are using
basic manuals as mere frameworks for grasping principles and professional consensus about practice while they are being introduced to studies and writings that stretch far beyond such manuals. They will be better and more creative practitioners. Continuing education offerings are beginning to reflect a diversity that goes beyond the essential archival meat and potatoes dinners to include a gourmet cooking with issues and advanced approaches. Finally, the profession has endorsed as a basic minimum guidelines for graduate education a separate masters degree. The Masters of Archival Studies degree stresses core knowledge, the interdisciplinary aspects of this knowledge, and the fact that there is a substantial cluster of concepts and approaches that requires serious education rather than apprenticeship disguised as education. While at present the apprenticeship mode still predominates with its heavy reliance on short-term institutes and workshops scattered through national and regional professional conferences, this will change over the next generation as well. We need to understand the evolution to this present stress on tightly specialized archival programs as parts of other degree programs from apprenticeship in the early twentieth century to a reliance on continuing education starting in the late 1930s to the slow emergence of archival education in library and information science schools and history departments in the 1960s. We are now poised to do much better.

3 A reliance on basic manuals by archival practitioners has always been problematic at best, but it is particularly so now.
We might be, in fact, on the verge of reaching for ideals in education and training far beyond our dreams of just a generation ago. Twenty years ago, we deemed it fortunate if we could assemble a few courses. Let me describe just one aspect of a new vision. Instead of developing a single educational venue that strives to educate individuals for all archival work, we might soon be able to think, realistically, about different venues for different types of work. Archival technicians might have bachelor's degrees with an array of continuing education. Professional archivists would be the product of M.A.S. degree programs, updated by advanced continuing education. Archivists with specialized tasks (electronic records management) or focused topical and institutional aspects (archivist in an immigration history program or archivist of a high-tech corporation) would have the M.A.S. degree plus another subject masters. Archivists who strive to be administrators would have the M.A.S. degree and a similar degree in public administration or related discipline. Archivists who become educators must have the doctorate in some discipline, ranging from history to library science and maybe even someday in archival science.

An Archival Waltz at the University of Pittsburgh

In the midst of immense change in archival education, expected because the world archivists work in is changing, what can be offered in more comprehensive graduate programs short of a separate masters degree? While it probably depends where you look and who you talk to, there is no doubt that dances are being held in these
programs that are providing a better educational experience than ever before thought possible. And while it is easy to see the shortcomings of such efforts (one faculty member, courses stretched to cover basic knowledge, sometimes uneasily fit into degree offerings), these weaknesses can be transformed in time through hard work, persistence, and professional leadership into the necessary form of separate masters degrees. The University of Pittsburgh archival education program in its School of Library and Information Science represents one such example of the still occurring transformation.

This school was opened at the University of Pittsburgh in 1962, having evolved from a library school at the Carnegie Institute. It was the first school to include "information" and "library" in its name, and it eventually supported two separate library and information science departments (1969) and expanded to include an undergraduate information science degree. The school has long been a leader in the education of librarians and other information professionals, and it is the largest school of its kind in North America, with nearly thirty-five faculty and over seven hundred students in undergraduate, masters, and doctoral programs in telecommunications, information science, and library science. Archival science is a recent introduction to its wide-ranging cluster of information professions, and while the number of students this program hosts is small (about ten to fifteen at any one time), the

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school is already established as one of the major centers for graduate study in this area as a result of its having a regular faculty appointment in this specialization and a curriculum that extends beyond a few courses.

The school’s interest in archival science was, until more recently, fairly erratic (not unlike the patterns shown by many other such schools). It was not until the mid-1970s that the school offered its first archives course. While offered irregularly and taught by an adjunct (the director of the University of Pittsburgh’s Archives of Industrial Society), this single course remained the only offering for students interested in this field. In 1986, the arrival of a new dean, Toni Carbo Bearman, brought renewed interest based upon her familiarity with archival matters and federal information policy. A faculty retreat held in 1987 identified archives and records management as a potential area for new development in specialization. As a result, in 1988 I was hired as a faculty member to develop a curriculum in archival science, making this school one of the few to have a full-time archival educator on its faculty.

Since 1988, the curriculum has expanded significantly, although it falls short of what is needed to support the movement for the establishment of Masters in Archival

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5 The Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences 1975-1977 Bulletin (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1975), 19. The course was entitled the “Management of Archives and Manuscripts.”

6 This type of adjunct arrangement has long been typical of the American archival profession’s approach to graduate education. University archivists and manuscript curators have been the backbone of archival education programs and, despite the growth in the number of regular faculty appointments in archival science, these individuals still remain the primary source of teaching about archives on the graduate level.
Science degrees such as exist in Canada. In that year a records management course and introductory library and archives preservation courses were added. The following year an advanced course in archival appraisal and an advanced course in preservation management expanded the curriculum. In 1991, another advanced course in archival arrangement, description, and reference was added. During a recent academic year, a course on science and technology archives was taught to enable archives students to examine one area of archival work and to apply their knowledge of basic archival functions; science and technology was a good choice for this kind of course because of the innovative work and research done on appraisal and documentation issues in these areas.

In addition to these courses, there are closely related courses, such as oral history and tradition, the history of books and printing, and critical bibliography. And there are, of course, numerous courses in information technology available to the archives student. The current records and information resources management course has now been revised to focus more on electronic records management, but it is still not sufficient to educate individuals to be electronic records archivists. This latter development is definitely the result both of the school’s involvement in an intensive institute for government archivists on the topic of electronic records and a recent effort to conduct research about electronic records. The expansion of this course

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7 We seem to be the same point with electronic records education as we were with graduate archival education thirty years ago -- cursory and more an appreciation than real education.
makes this school one of the few to offer a course on this topic as part of an archives specialization in North America.

The current curriculum ranges through the basic archival functions (appraisal, arrangement and description, reference, and preservation) while including a strong foundation in the administration of archival programs, a knowledge of the nature of records and archival theory and methodology that supports the handling of records, and an orientation to the North American archival community that graduates of its program would work in. Each course stresses the knowledge components of theory, methodology, and practice, along with other equally important elements. We try to develop measures or benchmarks that would assist an archival repository to consider what its degree of success is in meeting its mission. Research needs and skills are discussed. Each particular function or debate is set in its historical context, as a means of socializing the future archivist. Case studies are used at spots, although we are notoriously weak as a profession in this aspect of education. Literature is read deeply and broadly, as is related literature in other disciplines with insights for archival work and theory. The courses are full; not only is there plenty to teach, four full archival and several other related courses leave us still a long way short of providing a sufficient education for archival professionals. Imagine a twelve- or eighteen-credit masters degree program in any discipline, and I think my frustration as an educator and the student's desire for more can be readily understood.

This is precisely why the task of having students write long, in-depth essays in every course is as necessary as it
is in such a program. While course lectures and seminar-like discussions of professional literature develop the general parameters of archival knowledge in all its guises, the paper enables a student to dig far more deeply in one component of professional practice or theory. In my basic archives course, the directions for this assignment provide additional details of how I perceive this assignment as part of a student’s essential archival education. Students are asked to prepare a major paper on a historical topic, basic principle, or core function of archival or historical records programs, intended to enable the student to do in-depth reading and study on a single aspect of archival administration.

These papers are to consist of at least four parts: 1) definition of the function, principle, or historical aspect and its importance; 2) a review of the literature that reflects both key points of this aspect of archival administration and the development of archival theory on this principle or function; 3) an evaluation of the literature’s strengths and weaknesses, including any conclusions about needs in the profession; and 4) an assessment of how that literature would be useful to the staff of an historical records program. Students must show evidence of having read thoroughly at least twenty articles and, if appropriate, several monographs or textbooks for this paper. Students must also limit their papers to one of the following subjects or a more defined topic within these: 1) history, management and planning of archival and historical records programs; 2) identification and retention (appraisal and acquisition) of archival and historical records; 3) archival preservation; 4) reference and use of archival and historical
records; 5) public programs and advocacy; and 6) the history and nature of the archival profession or one of its core principles. In order to stress the relationship between theory and practice and to enhance problem-solving in these fledgling professionals, students who are working at archives or manuscript repositories may select the option of writing an analysis of some aspect of their employing institution (although he or she must be prepared to reflect the relevant literature and must present to the instructor a research proposal for his approval).

There are other necessary components of the paper requirements. The papers should be well-written, footnoted, and prepared according to the most recent edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. During the last class, some students may be asked to make presentations about their research. The student is also requested to narrow his or her topic as much as possible. In other words, the student should avoid selecting a subject as broad as "archival arrangement and description," a topic that has been discussed in hundreds of articles, numerous books, and many special reports. A much better focused subject would be something like a "comparison of authority control concepts and perspectives in library and archival science." Students who are committed to, or are contemplating committing to, the concentration in archival science in the MLS program should plan on (if possible) conducting research on an area that can be explored through the course of the three-term program. For example, a student interested in macro-appraisal approaches could prepare a preliminary general paper on this topic in the basic archives course, expand the paper in the archival appraisal course
Archival Education and Student Research

offered in the second term by analyzing how macro-appraisal has been utilized in science, technology, and medical archives, and explore this matter still further by completing a related fieldwork in an area archives in the last term.

Students may also elect to write a paper on some aspect of a core archival principle or even element of a basic definition. For example, archives students might be instructed in research on any aspect of the definitions of recordkeeping requirements, such as the notion of a "reliable" record or recordkeeping system; "structure" of a document; concept of a record's "integrity;" and notion of the "auditability" of records systems. Students interested in this are required to write papers on these basic concepts as reflected (or not reflected as the case may be) in the traditional archival and records management literature.

Since students sometimes also struggle to determine how to prepare and present their major papers, examples of published essays students could examine and use as general guides are provided. Students writing reviews of the published literature on a particular topic are urged to look at my article "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities" as an example of this kind of essay. Other students writing essays that compare basic archival functions to related or similar functions in other fields are asked to consider my "Researching Archival Function as an Information

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Function. Finally, some students endeavoring to write about a particular archival concept are directed to James O'Toole's article, "On the Idea of Permanence."

Dance Marathons and the Archival Student Paper

Writing the paper for the archives student can be a frustrating and exhausting experience, as well as an enriching educational experience. They discover the trials and tribulations of locating a professional literature scattered across many disciplines and, as a result, dispersed through many bibliographic services and sources. Archival students also are quickly introduced to the weaknesses of our professional literature, poor in definition and poorer in research. They wrestle with the complexities of a field based on a knowledge that is interdisciplinary in substance, while confronting a profession that often ignores the work of related disciplines which would seemingly offer much. And, of course, these students grapple with trying to build a contextual knowledge for what they are reading; they sometimes err in reading articles of twenty years ago as if they are still current and without a yet fully developed knowledge of the professional context of the particular article.

Despite these challenges, there is often an amazing development. Archival students learn while struggling with

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the papers, and, sometimes, they produce writings that not only edify their instructor but have something to say to the profession. The four essays published here are examples, in my opinion, of such writings. They have something to say to us, they reflect a learning process, and they are harbingers of important careers ahead.

Diane Shannon's essay on privacy issues affecting gay and lesbian archival holdings is a substantial contribution to the emerging archival literature on privacy and access concerns. Her approach is to consider the legal literature on the privacy tort and its relationship to the important concern with "outing" in the gay and lesbian community revealed through a survey. She discovered an interesting disparity between the legal and ethical issues and advocates for outing who are often instrumental in documenting the gay and lesbian community through the establishment of archives. Shannon has provided a portrait of problems often inherent in the motivations for the preservation and maintenance of archival records, as well as reveal the tangled web of legal and ethical issues common to access.

Kimberly Barata's examination of one dimension of the definition and defining guidelines for intrinsic value suggests why archivists need to develop more precise and practical definitions of their basic terminology. In my opinion the only working description of intrinsic value is riddled with inconsistencies and ambiguities. Barata's essay supports this by considering its adherence to the notion of aesthetic or artistic quality not by considering what archivists know about aesthetic quality but by looking at the term in art and art history. In this fashion, she shows the complexity of the
term and its nuances that reduce its effectiveness as a criterion in the way archivists used it in the panoply of terms scattered in the definition of intrinsic value. Archivists need assistance here, an option not well considered in the only writing we have on intrinsic value. I wonder just how well any archivist is employing the concept.

While Shannon and Barata are masters level students with no archival experience, Wendy Duff represents an experienced archivist studying for her doctoral degree in library science and with considerable experience in the architecture of descriptive standards in Canadian archives. She has used her opportunity to return to the academic cloister to study issues related to descriptive standards, in the case of this paper the matter of "use." Duff weaves through the labyrinth of modern appraisal theory with its cacophony of opinions about the relative importance of use as a factor in appraisal. She then suggests a different approach to incorporating use into the appraisal function, focusing on records, their context, and the archives environment and urging archivists to gain a more solid knowledge of just what use of archives constitutes, ceasing to be the weathervanes Ham lamented we were two decades ago.

Finally, David Miller, another masters student now working for the City of Philadelphia, has contributed to this special issue of Provenance. His essay on access to oral history first argues how oral history sources fit into the traditional realm of archival records and historical manuscripts. Miller proceeds farther in his analysis, stressing that access to oral history sources requires similar sensitivity to provenance and other similar elements of
archival records, less we "decontextualize" oral sources into little more than "curiosities." Oral histories need to be scrutinized as records, an argument both logical but seemingly seldom heeded in practice in archives or by oral historians.

Enjoy these contributions, and watch for these people through the years.

Richard J. Cox is an Associate Professor in Library and Information Science at the University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences where he teaches archival science. Dr. Cox has written extensively on archival records management professional issues, publishing articles in a number of journals and has written four major books on archival theory and practice, including American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States (1990), Managing Institutional Archives: Foundational Principles and Practices (1992); The First Generation of Electronic Records Archivists in the United States: A Study in Professionalization (1994), and Documenting Localities.
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