January 1979

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Recommended Citation
Myres, Sandra L., "Public Programs for Archives: Reaching Patrons, Officials and the Public," Georgia Archive 7 no. 1 (1979).
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol7/iss1/4

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS FOR ARCHIVES:
REACHING PATRONS, OFFICIALS, AND THE PUBLIC

Sandra L. Myres

Many of you have probably had some experience with public programs for archives, and perhaps your endeavors have been successful. However, all of you are probably aware that there are many pitfalls in publicizing archives, their holdings and programs. But most of the horrors you may have heard of, or even experienced, can usually be avoided by a well-thought-out and sensible approach to the public, public relations, and public programs.

The first step in any successful public program is to define the constituency or constituencies you are trying to reach. Each one has different needs and expectations, and different approaches will be necessary in designing meaningful and helpful programs. There are three major constituencies or groups which might be the target for public archives programs. These would include, not necessarily in order of importance, patrons, officials and the general public.

First, let us consider regular, i.e., academic and professional, users and researchers. Although most of these people will be in one of the disciplines of the humanities or social sciences with a preponderance of historians, political scientists, and sociologists, other disciplines may also use archival sources from time to time. Urbanologists, engineers, architects, city planners, geologists—to name only a few—often need and seek the information or services offered by state, local, or private archival depositories. A second category of regular patrons are those much maligned "little old ladies in tennis shoes," the genealogists. A third group of patrons are the occasional researchers, often amateurs rather than academics, who only wish to research a particular point or look up a particular document.

Another important constituency in addition to patrons and researchers are the many appointed and elected officials who in one way or another affect policies, budgets, and services which archivists will or will not be able to offer. Legislators, those important persons who make laws regarding use and who control that annual

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headache, the budget, are the most obvious of these officials. But members of the attorney general's staff, the governor's staff, city council members, members of various public and private boards and commissions, county and city clerks, university administrators, may all have an important role in formulating policies which affect archivists and their work. They may also control many of the materials which will eventually find their way into archival depositories.

A third, and perhaps the most important, constituency is that great faceless public which we will probably never see in our buildings, which will never know or care that there is such a thing as an archives, but whose truces will eventually pay the bills for most depositories.

How does one approach public programs and public relations for these different constituencies? One might assume that the first group, the users, already know who and where we are and what we have, and therefore should not be a primary target for informational or educational programs; but that is a mistake. Many archivists tell of being amazed and appalled by the numbers of historians who are profoundly inept in the techniques of archival research. I suspect that one of the reasons so much of the printed material put before us is a rehash of the old, rather than exciting material from new sources, is that the authors were once frightened by a Hollinger box. One look at all those shelves of, to them, unindexed and unverified materials, was enough to send them running to the nearest comfortable and familiar library with its bibliographies, guides, card catalogs and other known research tools. Even those patrons who do not suffer from acute "archivophobia" are frequently unaware of the kinds of materials that might be vital to their research and are no farther away than the closest depository. Of course, archivists have long been aware of the need to publicize holdings, as the lists of newly-accessioned materials which regularly appear in various professional journals attest. But an important corollary to these publishing activities are programs designed to appeal to the special interests and needs of both the regular and occasional patron.

Programs for patrons are also the least expensive and easiest programs to plan and carry out. The cost for such programs is only some staff time and travel expense, but the rewards in new friends, new patrons, and more successful researchers are innumerable. One or two-day state or regional conferences of the kind sponsored or co-sponsored by the National Archives are valuable, of course, but they are also time-consuming and often expensive. On the other hand, planning one session for a local, state, regional, or national meeting takes little time and can be equally rewarding. Many who would not attend a one-day conference on archives will attend one session at a professional meeting. Almost all groups to which regular and occasional patrons belong have one or more general meetings a year. A thoughtfully prepared program which presents several aspects of archival resources or research techniques useful to the members of the group will almost always be welcomed by the program committee.
In recent years, more and more such programs have appeared. In the spring of 1978 the Society of Southwest Archivists sponsored a session at the Texas State Historical Association meeting, which may become an annual event. Last fall the Western History Association Conference included a session on "Federal Records in the West," and a recent Mountain Plains Museum conference featured a paper on "The Function and Future of Archives." Historians and museum curators are obvious groups for programs on archives, but less traditional groups, such as architects or city planners, should not be overlooked. Good programs which help regular and occasional patrons, including genealogists, to become better and more efficient researchers will cut down staff time in servicing their requests and should substantially reduce the aspirin and tranquilizer budget.

There are a few "tricks of the trade" in planning programs for patrons. The first rule is to know your audience and design a program attractive to that audience. A "how-to" program may appeal to genealogists or to infrequent patrons such as engineers or hospital administrators. Academics will expect a different approach, but a paper on "The Archivist and the Historian (or Political Scientist or Sociologist) --Establishing a Working Relationship" will make more palatable the fact that many of those attending do not know how to use archival resources.

With very few exceptions, professional meetings are planned at least a year in advance. You should contact the program chairman at least twelve, and preferably fifteen to eighteen, months prior to the meeting about the possibility of an archives session, and request the date by which the proposed program should be submitted. You also need to inquire about any special rules of the organization regarding participants, time limits, or other guidelines. Prepare a proposal for a complete session, including suggestions for chairpersons and discussants. Program committees do not have time to match up papers, people, and presiders. Program sessions that appeal directly to the interest of the members and that provide a complete session outline which will fit within the time limits for a particular meeting or conference will have the best chance of being accepted by the committee. You should also inquire about exhibit or display space. For some organizations the cost will outweigh the benefits, but some groups provide this at low cost and in some cases it is even free!

Programs and exhibits can be used to inform patrons and potential patrons of new holdings, new arrangement techniques, new programs, and new policies. They can also gently educate patrons in the most efficient research techniques. Programs and exhibits can be invaluable as a public relations device. At the same time, they can make the work of the archivist easier and the researcher experience a happier one for everyone involved. They can also bring new recruits into your camp at those times when allies are needed to lobby for or against various proposals for policies and budgets which will affect both archivists and researchers.
Officials, both public and private, are a different breed from patrons. The care and management of bureaucrats and elected officials is fraught with dangers and difficulties. Most contacts with these officials come at budget time or when new policies affecting archival staff and services are being considered. Reports are prepared, presentations made, and some judicious lobbying is done. But programs which help officials to appreciate fully the role and scope of archives in both governmental and public service can help make budget negotiations easier. These programs can also help prevent those occasional crises when some well meaning but uninformed official sets out to recommend or implement policies which would be unpleasant if not disastrous.

Overworked bureaucrats will usually be grateful for seminars or workshops on records management, archival servicing of records, or suggestions for disposition of that stack of paper in the back office. Programs on the implications of the new copyright laws, information services acts, or "sunshine" legislation can be useful to legislators and other elected and appointed officials, and will help remind them that the archival staff does other things besides demand more money and larger facilities at the beginning of each fiscal year. Seminars on holdings and use for legislative assistants and the staffs of various departments and commissions can also pay off in new understanding and sympathy when bills and budgets come across legislative and executive desks. Again, these programs do not have to be expensive. They do require some staff time, close liaison with the intended audiences, careful planning, and good programming. The knowledge and good will gained, however, can more than repay the time and work invested.

There is one obvious danger signal in programs for officials: Beware of hidden agendas, either yours or those of the target audience. Be sure that no one uses the seminar or workshop as a platform to advocate only one point of view. These programs for officials should contain information, not propaganda. Stick to "nuts and bolts." Avoid controversial questions. Keep in mind that this is a programming and public relations area in which it is wise to speak softly and carry no stick, or at least no obvious stick.

It may seem far more difficult to reach the final group of constituents, the public at large. How do you acquaint the general public with your programs, services and needs? Particularly in view of Proposition 13 and the spread of the taxpayer revolt, public archival institutions must justify services and spending to a growing number of citizens previously unconcerned with archival resources or funding. Some archivists may think that the best tactic is to keep quiet and hope no one discovers them. Some of you, however, may decide that the best defense is a good offense and wish to initiate services and programs aimed at the general public.
There now operates in every state a humanities committee, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, to grant funds for public programs in a variety of areas. Until recently, such state programs were tied to public discussions of public policy issues. This requirement made it difficult for some groups and organizations, particularly archives, to participate. In the last year, however, expanded guidelines in all of the states have broadened the program to include projects which are not tied to hard-core public policy issues and are thus more attractive to organizations which for one reason or another could not or should not deal with controversial topics. Now it is possible to receive funds for programs in local history and culture, historic preservation, oral history, and folklore. If you talked with your state committee earlier and were discouraged from applying for funds because of the public policy requirement, you should contact them again and find out about their expanded mandate.

Although programs and guidelines for state-based programs vary from state to state, a few examples will perhaps give you an idea of the activities possible with such grants. One state grant helped sponsor a statewide conference on ways of preserving the state's documentary heritage. Funds were also available for printing and mailing the conference report—an excellent public relations device in itself. Another grant provided funds for a film stressing the need for preserving local records, how to establish policies for the collection and care of such records, and where to get help and advice. A third program featured a traveling exhibit and discussion of historic documents and their importance to people today.

The amount of money granted for such programs will vary, depending on the state committee's guidelines and the ambition of the planners. Some very good programs can be provided for a few hundred dollars while others may cost several thousand. All state-based programs must be closely tied to the humanistic disciplines, which are natural allies for archivists. Since history, literature, languages, and philosophy are all closely related to archival theory and practice, good humanities programming should also be good archival programming.

The possibilities for public programs of this type are almost limitless. They do require careful thought and planning. Be sure that you have considered all the possibilities; be imaginative. Think carefully about the audience you want to reach and why. What are their primary interests? What are their special needs? Target your audience; an open invitation is likely to produce meager attendance at best. Confer with members of groups you expect to attract and get their ideas and suggestions. Outline your program objectives and design a program which will meet these objectives. Work closely with the staff of your state's humanities committee. They have had a great deal of experience in public programming and will be happy to help you with ideas, resources, and publicity.
Most of these committees have booklets or brochures which offer helpful suggestions and guidelines for planning public programs. In fact, many state staffs have already prepared publicity and public relations handbooks. Even if you do not want to apply for funds for a program, copies of these booklets may give you some good ideas for publicizing your resources and services.

Public programs, carefully planned and well executed, can be beneficial to archivists and patrons. They can even be fun!