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The Objectives of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission's Records Program

Gerald F. Ham
Wisconsin State Historical Society

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The objectives of the records program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) are--or should be--familiar to you all. They have been spelled out most concisely in the "Statement of National Needs and Preferred Approaches for Historic Records," which is really our first national records statement.¹ They have been amplified in circular letters, in published interviews with staff and commission members, and in the short but lucid retrospective sketch in the 1978 commission report to the president.

From the beginning, the commission chose strategies that emphasized program development on a broad front, rather than the application of some monolithic prescription. Thus, it rejected formula distribution of grants to the states and the first-come-first-served approach of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The commission opted for programs to change, rather than reinforce, the existing state of archival affairs.

To date the commission has given priority to funding in four areas. The first was a "rescue"


F. Gerald Ham is the State Archivist of Wisconsin.
operation to salvage endangered records. This pro-
gram was cheap, quick, and its results highly visible.
A second objective was the development of strong rec-
ords programs independent of continuing federal
assistance. Many of these grants have been used as a
lever to secure commitments for future program devel-
opment, or to give initial planning and development
support for programs that, once established, can be
maintained by the grantee. Third, the commission has
emphasized projects which develop and publicize new
methods and techniques. The Society of American
Archivists manuals, a project to accession machine-
readable public records, and the development of dis-
position standards for labor grievance files are all
examples of projects that promise a widespread, long-
term impact. A fourth area of emphasis has been proj-
ects that promote institutional cooperation, such as
regional conservation programs and a multistate proj-
ect to develop a cooperative automated system to de-
scribe state archival records.

It is not surprising that a national records pro-
gram, largely emanating from Washington with an avowed
aim of rearranging the archival landscape in the prov-
inces, has produced some tensions--tensions that can
be either creative, destructive, or both. Many of
these tensions have to do with the way in which the
commission dispenses its largess.

Some have argued for splitting the pie "even
Stephen" or by some specified formula. Others have
argued that the limited funding should be used in a
way to maximize the development of comprehensive pro-
grams within the states--a pump-priming incentive.
Some agree with the commission's broad front approach,
and argue that the scope of the program should be ex-
panded even further to include such things as records
management, oral history, exhibits, and even equipment
purchase.
Still others believe that, given the current level of funding, the program needs a narrower, not wider, focus. To those coordinators, many of whom are the state archivists, this means concentrating on strengthening the public records programs in the states, one of the purposes for which the program was conceived originally. Fearful that the program will become a mini-NEH, some oppose grants for special area collecting, for processing, or other activities designed to make collections available to scholars in the humanities—activities they see as a basic funding responsibility of the individual archival agency. Some feel that more emphasis must go toward research and development. Finally, several critics argue that the highest priority should go to creating a strong state-level planning and coordinating mechanism—a real records board, not an advisory one.

This is only a sample, not a catalog, of issues that have been raised about the national role of the records program. This afternoon a group of us will be examining these and, I am sure, many other issues as we debate whether the objectives of the national records program need to be redefined. However, to discuss objectives in a meaningful context, I think we also need to think about what are our most pressing national needs. Only then can we discuss a national agenda to meet these needs.

As a start, let me suggest some of these national needs. We must first develop guidelines and strategies for more coherent and comprehensive acquisitions programs at all levels—the community, the region, and the nation. We also must provide easy and centralized access to information about increasingly decentralized and complex archival holdings. If we are not to prejudice over closed-ended holdings, we must deal with the impact of technology on the production and preservation of information formats. If we do not deal with the impact of freedom of information and the right to privacy legislation on the quality and content of the
archival record, there may be no public archival record in the future. Finally, we must raise society's awareness of the support required for national archival preservation and make more effective and efficient use of available archival resources.

To stimulate discussion this afternoon, I have drafted as a committee agenda six national objectives that may help us to come to grips with these and similar needs. This agenda is based partly on the commission's "Statement of National Need," on the statements of needs from the various states, and on the reports of various forums which discuss the national role of the records program.

The goal of the national records program is to promote a greater and more effective effort by government and private organizations to preserve and make available for use those records that further an understanding and appreciation of American life and culture. To achieve this goal, the purpose of the national records program should be:

1. To promote cooperation among archival institutions at all levels

One objective of a national program is to promote cooperative approaches to common problems, including the creation of cooperative structures such as networks, consortia, and regional conservation centers. Archivists must abandon the fiction that adequate care for the historical records will result from each archival institution's independent pursuit of its own narrow institutional goals. Interinstitutional cooperation is especially urgent in high technology areas such as the preservation of newer recording media and the application of electronic data processing to archival administration. Cooperation of another sort is crucial to the creation of a national bibliographic data base and to any coordinated institutional acquisition activities.
Formal networks of regional centers coordinated by statewide archival agencies can provide a cooperative structure to spur archival development and maximize limited resources for archival work. In areas such as training and education or institutional standards for the profession, regional and national professional organizations may be the appropriate vehicles to carry out activities beyond the scope or capability of individual institutions. In each case, the commission and boards must continue to remove barriers and to increase incentives for cooperation.

2. To promote the development of improved system-wide records programs

The development of sound archives and records programs for state and local governments, for institutions of higher learning, and larger private organizations is an essential element in any national records program. The commission encourages such combined archives and records programs to insure the proper identification and retention of archival materials and the efficient disposition of other records. The development of model programs within such an organization can demonstrate their value, lead to their extension, and provide for testing and modification prior to adoption on a wider scale. Archival and records management professions should cooperate on programs of mutual interest.

3. To promote programs of archival awareness and assistance, especially for the records of organizations and institutions formerly outside the traditional archival framework

An increasingly large segment of the archival record will continue to be in the custody of those who are not professional archivists, especially as more and more organizations maintain their own records. A greater attempt must be made to arouse their concern about, and awareness of, proper archival procedures,
as well as to provide them with an increasing number of direct technical and other assistance programs. Through workshops, instructional material, on-site consultation, and cooperative use of archival facilities, state boards and other archival organizations should develop comprehensive programs to assist such institutions in establishing effective in-house archival programs.

4. To promote the wider use of archives

A fourth objective of a national records program should be promotion of the wider use of archival resources. As more and more of the archival record is on media such as film and magnetic tape, archivists have the capacity to make ever-increasing segments of their records as easily available as the printed book. Programs for the preservation of such mediums that stress wider availability as well as security and preservation should have a high priority.

In addition to programs to disseminate the information in the records, a greater attempt should also be made, through the packaging of archival materials exhibitions, audiovisual and mass media programming, and inexpensive publications, to broaden the current archival constituency and develop new ones.

5. To promote programs in research and development

A fifth objective is to promote a program of archival research and development. Such a program is integral to the objectives above. If such programs as cooperative collection strategies, conservation and information networks, and sampling and bulk reduction techniques are some of our real needs, then archivists must improve the tools and techniques to make these programs operational. The commission recognizes not only the necessity to develop and test specific models and methods to improve practice, but also the
importance of developing much needed theoretical studies in the collection, control, and use of information. Research programs should stress those programs that provide for maximum sharing and dissemination of results.

6. To promote archival planning as a strategy and to develop an institutional structure for such planning both within the states and between the states and the commission.

Thorough and skillful planning is a fundamental precondition for progress toward the objectives I have discussed. Planning is essential to the process of identifying and analyzing records needs, delineating objectives, devising and testing strategic approaches, and evaluating achievement. The state board is an "indispensable vehicle" for such planning, for it can reflect the diverse, sometimes competing, archival interests that must develop a colloquy about mutual problems and their solutions. At the same time, we must create a structure to maintain a dialogue between the boards and the commission, so that national planning and priorities mesh with, and truly reflect, state needs.

The commission must give greater emphasis to assistance in planning, for it is apparent that many states can greatly benefit from outside help in identifying planning goals and developing step-by-step planning procedures. Indeed, for archivists, planning on this scale is still a relatively new activity; and at both the state and national level, we must devote more time to the process of effective planning— and its implementation.