Short Subjects: Athens and Sparta: The Archivist and Resource Allocators

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One result of the social, economic, and technological changes and developments of the past two decades has been an increased monetary pressure on educational institutions. Rare is the academic or other nonprofit institution that has not found it necessary to mount a fund-raising campaign. Economic pressures on educational institutions are not new nor are efforts to solve them. What is new is the intensity and pervasiveness of monetary accountability, the professionalism employed in fund raising, and the web of involvement that affects everyone in an administrative position, no matter how minor. Fiscal responsibilities that once were confined to the province of presidents, treasurers, and governing boards now fall within the accountability of all levels of administration. Archives administrators are faced not with a problem but with a challenge: How do archives get their share of the pie from resource allocators and through the efforts of professional institutional fund raisers?

Harvard University is well known for having the largest endowment of any American educational institution, although some of its administrators would be hard pressed to prove it from experience. This endowment almost entirely is a twentieth century development. A perusal of records in the university archives reveals the distress of the governing boards when John Hancock got busy in Philadelphia and neglected (some have used stronger words) the university’s finances. John Thornton Kirkland, president from 1810 to 1828, expanded the university’s influence and student body
representation well beyond New England. He was not a good money man, however; and when Nathaniel Bowditch, the Great Navigator, became a member of the Harvard Corporation in 1826, he found an institution in serious financial difficulty. He got rid of the treasurer, and President Kirkland soon resigned due to poor health.

Bowditch put things in order and set the university on a road to solvency and expansion from which it seldom has deviated. It was around this time that Harvard begin to use the phrase "every tub on its own bottom," a philosophy of accountability still very much in effect that places fund-raising responsibilities on each faculty and other administrative units within the university. This philosophy filters down within faculties to individual units, and at budget time "every tub on its own bottom" is an oft repeated phrase.

Harvard had only two presidents between 1869 and 1933, Charles William Eliot and Abbot Lawrence Lowell. Under their leadership, the university underwent tremendous expansion in its physical plant, in the number and variety of courses offered, and in its educational influence nationally. This was all well and good and reflected the growth and economic expansion of the country as a whole. Such expansion, however, requires capital to initiate and even more capital to continue. Under Eliot, Harvard made its first organized fund-raising efforts. A. Lawrence Lowell, patrician of patricians, contributed partially to the salaries of some of his faculty and built a number of college buildings with his own funds; yet even President Lowell had to beg. He had his own expansion plans and had to support the great physical and educational heritage left to him by Eliot.

The foregoing is offered as an example of how financial needs grew and how they were met in one large university up to the early decades of this century. Scope and scale might vary among educational institutions, but the fundamentals of meeting financial needs were similar. Fund
raising tended very much to be a personal endeavor conducted only by the most senior officers of an institution. While at one time a college president might deal directly with an Andrew Carnegie, an Andrew Mellon, a John D. Rockefeller or a Henry Ford, in more recent decades institutional representatives have to deal with the Carnegie Corporation, Mellon Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Ford Foundation. They must deal with the professional bureaucrats who run these foundations. It takes professional money raisers to deal with professional money givers—individuals trained to deal with competition for funds, with tax codes, investments, government influence and regulations, and the myriad complexities that today surround the transfer of money from individual to institution and from institution to institution. While a college president remains central to fund raising with the largest of individual and corporate donors, actually and symbolically, he cannot be expected to master all the intricacies of fund raising and allocation, nor to know and represent every facet of interest in a large institution.

Thus, in the past half century and particularly in the past two decades, there has been a large increase in professional fund raisers and professional resource allocators. Where once the vice-president, budget officer, and fund raiser were alumni with social charm or some talent for financial affairs who might look upon the college archives with nostalgic support, they now tend to be nongraduate professionals who may move from institution to institution every few years. Their job is to keep the institution solvent and—with minds unclouded by nostalgia—they hone in like ferrets on institutional units that are expensive to operate but produce little or no income. Unfortunately, archives with their sister libraries, museums, and manuscript repositories often are targets for examination and fiscal justification.
Archives and libraries are expensive to operate and part of this has come about through the social and technological change referred to above. The Harvard University Archives may be used as an example. Twenty-seven years ago when an apprentice went to work in the Harvard archives at $3,200, the entire budget for salaries for five full-time staff, supplies, and other line items was $58,000. At that time the only technical equipment was two ancient mechanical typewriters and two telephone instruments. During the passage of a quarter century, the staff has tripled and the budget is thirteen times as large as it was in 1960. Inflation is the largest factor in this budgetary increase, but there are other factors as well. Archivists like to complain about salaries, but in most institutions salaries are better now than they were in 1960, including benefit packages with medical, dental, life insurance, disability insurance, and retirement plans. Some colleges and universities are unionized, placing a constant pressure on the college or university for larger salaries and more benefits. The ancient typewriters have been replaced by complicated typewriting instruments, computers, and word processors. Harvard has a fairly new building with environmental controls, and the two telephone instruments have increased to ten. There is a photocopy machine, microform reader, a printer, a RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network) terminal, and some audiovisual equipment. There are also all of those acid-neutral supplies and preservation materials. This all costs money and, proportionally, costs a lot more money than it did when there were a few staff members, two beat-up mechanical typewriters, and two telephone instruments.

The same situation is affecting libraries and other units in nonprofit institutions. While much of this scenario is true only for the larger academic archives, elements of it are true for all colleges and university archives. Social changes and technological developments have made expectations higher, and the realization of these higher expectations costs money. When these changes coincide with a long period of national
economic stringency, archives administrators are faced with the challenge of getting their share (at least) from resource allocators and fund raisers.

Administrative placement and a strong mandate from the college or university governing board are essential. The archives has to be defined clearly as a functioning unit to receive broad internal recognition. It does not matter a great deal where the archives is placed administratively as long as it is clearly and firmly placed. The majority of college and university archives are included administratively in the library system. Others fall within the province of the chancellor, a vice-president, or the legal office. For nearly a century and one-half, the Harvard archives has been a part of the university library. While the archives administrator has to be wary constantly about becoming the "poor child" of the library and has to compete with other library units for budgets and special funding, the top library administrator, by training and background, usually has some affinity for the archives and can serve as a useful buffer in times of financial pressure. An individual archives administrator may establish strong bonds of support more easily with top administrators if he does not have to work through the administrative level represented by the library director, but the top administrators may soon be gone, the archivist may soon be gone, and the institution's archives, without the administrative cushion of the library, may be subject to the whims of new top administrators who do not realize the importance of archives.

To function effectively, an archives does need a clear and firm mandate from the institution's top administrative body, establishing the archives's responsibility for collecting, maintaining, preserving, and providing information from the institution's official records. Without this mandate the archives is likely to serve only as a repository for memorabilia of the college or university. While this is an important function for an archives, it is not likely to appeal
strongly to the professional and pragmatic resource allocators. They are more interested in practical services and that is where records management comes in.

The Harvard archives did not have a fully organized and professional approach to records management until 1982. However, for a half century previous to that date it had accepted university records in a piecemeal kind of way and had made it a policy to provide information from these records to administrators as quickly and efficiently as possible. When the budget and staff cuts came in the middle 1970s, the libraries, and particularly the rare books and manuscripts library, felt the effects severely. While the archives did not grow for some years it was not cut. Indications, gleaned over a period of time, were that the archives performed a practical service to those offices that determined budget allocations, and so had been spared. This convinced archives staff more than ever that a records management program was needed—a need that became a reality in 1982.

For five and one-half years, under Harvard's first records management officer, Richard Haas, the thrust of Harvard's records management program was to provide a practical and efficient service to the university for maintaining records, arranging for the destruction of records of term value, and supplying information from records retained. While much remains to be accomplished, Rick Haas should be given great credit for increasing the Harvard archives's visibility in a positive way within the university and both directly and indirectly for the increased support the archives has received in recent years. If the records management program had not been placed administratively under the archives, the archives would not have this pragmatic leverage.

Most who choose archives as their professional field enjoy serving scholars and other researchers. In the case of the Harvard archives a large percentage of this use is from
outside the university. Manuscripts, publications, and other memorabilia relating to the institution are interesting and a pleasure to share with others who are interested. In this way the archives functions like a library and particularly like a rare books and manuscripts library. It has been and continues to be clear, however, that the new professional breed of resource allocators, who often are not nostalgically connected with the institutions they operate, want practical results and care little about serving the greater scholarly community. For an archives to gain necessary support and to expand, it needs to provide a practical and clearly definable service. That is where records management enters the picture. By combining Athenian ideals with Spartan pragmatism, archivists have the best chance of gaining the support they seek.

Resource allocators and development officers have different administrative functions but, through their mutual monetary concern, work closely together. At the Harvard archives it is a policy to work closely with the development office. Fairly often a request comes in for an item that may evoke nostalgic generosity in a potential donor. An archivist should not be in business to give away collections and must consider professional ethics in how he cooperates. However, the archives does keep a certain amount of duplicates of Harvard publications, programs, brochures, and photographs on hand (more than is often practical), and generally, some item from this trove will do the trick. The item may seem small and insignificant but the gesture of cooperation has been made. When the archives cannot meet a request, alternatives are suggested.

Several years ago a telephone call came from one of the new breed of planning officers. He said that Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill was coming to Harvard and that the new Vice-President for Government and Community Relations (a new breed title) wanted to present O'Neill with a nice nineteenth century print of the university. The planning officer thought the archives probably had something lying
around. The archives does have some fine nineteenth century prints of Harvard, but none with which the archives staff was willing to part. Realizing that pressures might be brought to bear and that money probably was not a consideration, the archives staff called George Goodspeed of Goodspeed’s Book Shop in Boston and determined that he had very nice copies of two Harvard nineteenth century prints and would be happy to sell one of them. The archives staff called the planning officer back, told him what was available, and suggested that perhaps the new vice-president would like to take a look in the archives at its copies to see what he might like to order from Mr. Goodspeed. The vice-president, a personable fellow, came over and looked at the prints. He found one he liked, ordered it from Mr. Goodspeed, and left feeling pleased and knowing something about the university archives. The incident did, however, produce some anxious moments.

During Harvard’s $350 million fund-raising campaign, the archives received a call from the president’s administrative assistant. The next day the president and dean of the faculty were paying a call on one of the university’s largest donors, who shall be called Mr. Crowninshield for the purposes of this story, hoping to tap once again an oft tapped source. Would it be appropriate to attach his name to a functionally named building, and if they needed another choice, what relation was Mr. Crowninshield to a woman with the same surname after whom part of another building was named? Dropping all other activities, the archives staff quickly determined that the building did not bear the original donor’s name at his request and reminded the president’s office that the university was embroiled in a controversy with the original donor’s family over the potential sale of a gift of land. Adding the name Crowninshield to the building certainly would not help the situation. However, the archives staff determined that the
part of another building named after a Crowninshield was named after Mr. Crowninshield's mother. He might wish to have his name attached to the building as well.

These are examples of how to work with resource allocators and development officers by using the present and past resources of the archives. While this is a generally optimistic picture of dealing with allocators, all the archives's experience has not been positive. The archives has a long way to go to meet what its staff perceives as support needs from the university. Automation efforts are only in the early stages, and adequate staff for processing collections is a constant struggle. The stereotypes mentioned in the Levy report have validity. The 350Th. Anniversary Committee generously saw that the archives was well supplied with the special collections of photographs and lithographs produced for the event, costing several thousand dollars per collection. They did not, however, come across with money to deal appropriately with the hundreds of hours of official sound recordings, video tapes, and motion picture film produced for the occasion. Although the archives administrator has worked with the development office for many years and knows some of the staff quite well, he was at first startled and then discouraged recently to have a new developer who has floated around several of the ivy league colleges ask him whether his job was full-time—meaning not as head of the archives but as the entire staff of the archives.

Archivists dealing with professional resource allocators and development officers whose goals are pragmatic and who may have little knowledge about the goals and functions of an archives have a constant responsibility to educate about what they do and why they do it. If in this continual process archivists can effectively and even aggressively show

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resource allocators how to use the archives as a practical information resource and evince a willingness to assist them with goals and functions, then archivists may reap rewards. Archivists will not get very far if they consider dealing with resource allocators as a problem. Instead, they should look upon it as a challenge, a necessity for survival and growth in an atmosphere where economic pressure appears to have weighted the scales of fortune more in the direction of Spartan pragmatism than in the direction of Athenian ideals.

Harley P. Holden is Curator of the University Archives at Harvard. This article was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, New York City, 5 September 1987.