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Strategies for Archival Action in the 1980s and Beyond: Implementing the SAA Goals and Priorities Task Force Report *

Richard J. Cox

This essay is written by an archivist primarily for archivists, but its content concerns a subject—the preservation of America's documentary heritage—that is important to a much wider audience. Archivists have long recognized that theirs is a profession with a broad mandate handicapped by far too limited resources. In the past few years, through a series of major investigations and reports, archivists have learned the extent of the threat to historical records in the United States caused by their profession's own weaknesses. Some will undoubtedly bristle at that last sentence and argue that numerous other reasons exist for the poor condition of this nation's historical records. True, but the major responsibility for the care of America's documentary heritage is one that most archivists can and will not deny is theirs. Given their profession's general poverty and its tremendous obligation, archivists must learn, among other things, to plan carefully for the more judicious use

* Although the author participated on one of the working groups of the GAP Task Force, this paper is an official view of that body. The author is especially indebted to Larry J. Hackman for his comments.
of restricted means and for programs that will enable them to gain greater resources. The report of the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Goals and Priorities (GAP) Task Force is the archival profession's most recent and best opportunity to begin to do just that.

The archival profession has been involved in planning in one way or another for over thirty years. Ernst Posner's *American State Archives* is the result of 1960s planning and is a monumental classic of archival literature. The Society of American Archivists' Committee for the Seventies led to the hiring of the association's first executive director and laid the foundation for a stronger, more vibrant profession. It was this committee that envisioned an extensive set of writings on the basics of our professional practices and standards, a goal that virtually has been achieved.

Planning in the 1980s is different. Some archivists talk about planning as if it was something new, and it seems to be. Most now realize that previous efforts at planning have been generally unsuccessful. The first SAA committee on planning produced a single paragraph report; the next committee only searched (unsuccessfully) for their predecessor's records. Posner's excellent report was treated as a reference book or history of the profession and not the agenda for change that it really was and begged to be. The Committee for the Seventies, while perhaps the most successful planning effort, largely restricted itself to the internal organization of the SAA and did not touch upon broader professional issues. More typical, unfortunately, is the legacy of the already forgotten 1977 Conference on Setting Priorities for Historical Records which issued a report, raised some issues, and hoped things would work out. Even many of the state assessment and reporting projects reports, completed less than two years ago, seem forgotten and unused. The apparent difference with planning in the 1980s is that it is being done in an environment of urgency that does not provide any luxury of failure.
Increasingly, a small but growing group of archivists are staking on planning hopes to resist the rapidly deteriorating condition of America's documentary heritage.

The 1980s represent a much more complex world than the archival forebears knew or could even dream. Although the profession has grown significantly in numbers, it still must appoint a task force to grapple with the issue of why it is misunderstood, not only by the general populace, but by its administrators. This is the "information age," yet archivists question their own ability to deliver information. There is an ever increasing use of technology to capture and control information, but many archivists not only remain more comfortable with paper records, but treat them as revered artifacts. Perhaps most disheartening, archivists call themselves a profession, yet must admit that their standards are lax; they continually welcome into their fellowship persons who, with little or no training, are declared to be archivists and given the responsibilities of such, voiding one of the preeminent characteristics of a profession. It was in this climate that the Society of American Archivists' GAP Task Force originated and issued a draft of its report for consideration by the archival profession.

The GAP Task Force only dates back a few years, developing in the same period as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)-sponsored state assessment and reporting projects and out of the 1982 SAA meeting's theme of "Planning in an Archival Environment." The task force was appointed in September 1982 and for a period of two years—beefed up by the addition of several working groups and the support of NHPRC funds—worked on preparing a draft of Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities. This report is not the end of the task force; its report is subject to further discussion and refinement, and its recommendations suggest that archival planning is a
continuous process. There is little need to discuss the draft report in great detail since copies of it are readily available and, while the report is not easily summarized, it is important to review the assumptions of the group responsible for the report, look at its content and structure, and examine its most important recommendation—the establishment of a committee on archival planning.

The task force report can be reduced to five assumptions. First, support for archival work is insufficient to identify and preserve America's documentary heritage. Second, the archival profession must more aggressively encourage and carry out planning, cooperation, research and development, and advocacy and public information programs if it expects to make efficient use of its limited resources. Third, the responsibilities of the archivist and his or her repository must extend beyond any single individual or institution if the profession is to achieve what must be its preeminent goal of preserving the historical record. Fourth, records and information management are integral components of the archival profession; without them, its ability to preserve the historical record is seriously restricted. Fifth, and finally, the archival community is considered to encompass all individuals, institutions, and associations involved in the labor of preserving the archival record. These assumptions form the basis of the final report of the task force.

The report itself is built around a brief mission statement of the archival profession—"to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of records of enduring value to society"—and includes one section devoted to each major goal of that mission. Each goal is broken down to more specific objectives, strategies, and activities that constitute an agenda for action, at least as far as can be perceived in the mid-1980s. The main criticism of the report has not been on its content but on its breadth of concern, causing some to see it as little more than an elaborate—and largely unattainable—"wish list"
for the archival profession. It is precisely for this reason that the primary focus of deliberation of the report should be equally divided between analyzing its content and its recommendation for some sort of ongoing planning committee that provides a regional focus on planning and development.

A committee on archival planning is a necessity for any success in accomplishing the goals stated in the task force report. As presently recommended, the body would consist of members (appointed by the SAA) from regional and state archival associations, from related professions such as history and library science, and from recent leaders of the SAA. The need for the committee is due to the recognition that planning must be an ongoing process, and its mission would be threefold:

1. To carry out an active and open process to establish, refine, update, and promulgate statements of mission, goals, objectives, strategies, and activities and to recommend priority activities for the archival community;
2. To foster the activities recommended through this process, especially the activities of high priority; and
3. To promote planning by archival organizations and associations.

As such, the committee is an effort to create a non-isolated climate that encourages efforts like the Bentley fellowships, National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF), the Joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology (JCAST), and the Coalition for the Preservation of Architectural Records (COPAR), and that provides a mechanism for encouraging cooperation with other related professions as well as records users and creators. If the archival profession is honest, it must admit that the task force report is only a proposed agenda and the planning committee only one means for beginning to meet that agenda. What is really being considered are some very fundamental changes to the profession that encourage greater
sustained research and development. The SAA Council has already taken the first step in such a change by reauthoring the GAP Task Force for three additional years.

Certainly the planning committee would be the most important and fundamental change for the archival profession. For the first time it would give an interdisciplinary national focus to the needs and goals of the archival profession and its mission. It would equip the national associations, like the SAA and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA), to do what they have not been able to do very successfully— to move beyond organizational needs and goals to plan for the entire profession. Such a committee would be able to knit together such national efforts as the local government records committee sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the industry action committees of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), the various sections of the SAA, the Committee on the Records of Government, and NAGARA into a more coherent national agenda for America's documentary heritage. Despite how diverse the archival profession might seem to be, with a wide variety of institutions and constituencies, its primary mission to preserve and manage historical records is one that begs for a national plan. The planning committee is not, of course, the answer to all of the archival profession's problems. For the task force's agenda to have any reasonable chance of success there must be important changes in archival education and training programs, historical records advisory boards, regional archival associations, and archival institutions.

Of all of the above elements of the archival profession there has been more written about education than any other and with good reasons. Education standards are the foundation of every profession. Archivists, however, lack control over this important area. The formulation of archival theory has been slowed because of a lack of firm
footing in academia and a continuing orientation to practical rather than theoretical issues. The task force report suggests changes in the profession's attitude toward and practice of archival education, but without some basic, remedial changes in archival education the profession will be unable to support adequately efforts to address these changes. Specifically, archival education—whether tied to a history department, library school, or public or applied history programs—must be as attentive to theory as practice. For example, many groundbreaking historical studies evolve out of the graduate school thesis or dissertation—the same could happen for the archival profession. Many archival education programs do not encourage, however, the study and writing of theses on archival subjects or the writing of theses at all. The GAP Task Force report could be used as an agenda for such study. Some archivists examining the task force report have even suggested that it could be used to introduce individuals studying to be archivists to the nature of the profession.

Much of the discussion about archival theory in recent years has lamented an individual's lack of free time from administrative responsibilities as a reason for the profession's difficulties in developing an adequate theory. While this argument is persuasive, it is certainly not comprehensive and, in fact, neglects the strengths of developing archival theory in the heated atmosphere of the archival repository. Although it would be difficult to state that this has not had a generally negative influence upon the development of archival theory, there are still bright spots. All through his career, for example, Theodore R. Schellenberg was devoted to the "development, systematization, and standardization of archival principles and techniques." In each phase of his career, Schellenberg's experiences sharpened his archival writings. At the National Archives as director of archival management, he prepared a series of Staff Information Circulars and laid the foundation for his
Australian lecture tour and subsequent publication, Modern Archives, Schellenberg, for all practical purposes, was the "National Archives theoretician-in-charge." What would happen if the archival profession could formally establish a greater number of positions similar to what Schellenberg held during the 1950s? Creation of institutional research and development units would free individuals to study archival matters and prepare published studies of these issues. The duties of such units could consist of fostering long-range goals and priorities; conducting research projects required by the repository and also identified as needs by the profession; publishing research; overseeing the continued professional development of the institution's staff through internal seminars, coordination of guest speakers, and interinstitutional exchange of professional staff; and identifying and acquiring funding sources for special or more complex projects. Since many of the identified goals of the task force report concern or relate to archival institutions, especially state archives and other large research repositories, the creation of such units is a logical step. Research and development units do not necessarily have to be large divisions but can consist of single individuals freed from administrative duties that normally hinder the profession's ability to produce such work. If business corporations only relied upon universities and colleges to develop technology necessary for the creation of new products, they would not remain competitive very long. Why should the archival profession similarly rely only on such formal education programs and not make a broader commitment to developing archival theory and to planning for its development? In one sense, the proposed planning committee or the continued task force could be a national research and development body.

One of the groups that has received the greatest attention recently, in regards to planning, has been the Historical Records Advisory Board created to
support the funding program of the NHPRC. Although the NHPRC has hoped for these boards to be much more than they have been, prior to the state assessment and reporting projects they were little more than grant reviewers and, in many cases, most remain tied to that function. Since the early 1980s, however, their role has been significantly expanded to one of statewide planning and coordination because of the state assessment and reporting projects. To fulfill this role successfully would enable them to become an important vehicle in assisting the greater goals and priorities of the archival profession, entities for the planning committee to work with and assign projects. For this the boards must expand their membership beyond just archivists and their colleagues to records users, legislators, creators, supporters, and the concerned public; they must possess a clear commitment to statewide archival planning and be able to relate their state plan to national professional goals and plans; and, finally, they must be able to influence the larger and key repositories within the state to support the plan. The existence of such boards or, in their place, other coalitions or consortia, carries national archival planning and development down from the national plane to the arena of the states.

Regional archival associations, formed in the early 1970s as an alternative to the SAA, have become extremely important in carrying archival issues to a broader local constituency and have assumed, as well, much of the SAA role of providing basic archival training and education. Some of the larger associations have served as forums for the testing and development of ideas later brought into national focus, and two have successfully supported important journals for archival writings.

However, there must be some basic changes in these associations for them to play a greater role in archival planning and development. For one, their support of the ideas of the GAP Task Force and the planning committee could extend to modelling their annual and semiannual meetings after specific
activities in the task force's report, encouraging the preparation and critiquing of formal papers on these subjects that could contribute to the advancement of the profession. Furthermore, these associations should serve as an introduction for the newer members of the profession to the broader vision and needs of the archival community and as a means of attracting wider audiences of records users and creators that can consider, debate, and formulate new strategies for the preservation of this nation's documentary heritage. The regional associations could also serve as mechanisms for encouraging high priority research projects on a regional level or as a way of tracking and disseminating information about important projects. And, finally, the associations can extend beyond the specific needs or interests of their regions, developing cooperative strategies for the implementation of certain professional goals. Certainly this last role is the regional archival associations' greatest potential contribution to the process of archival planning and the continuing development of the profession.

Although such a national planning committee is essential to the continued growth of the archival profession, no one body or group will bring about the changes necessary to commit the profession to ongoing, dynamic, and essential priorities and activities. All levels of the profession must make this commitment—from the institutional to the university training ground to the statewide and regional groups—if the archival profession is to continue to grow, identify needs, and adapt to the changing society in which it is a member and that it endeavors to document. Considering the weakness of the archival profession's theory and literature, all of these groups could simultaneously attack the needs described in the task force report. It will be helpful to consider how a few elements of the report could be coordinated by a planning committee.

One of the strategies in the appraisal goal is "stimulate the development of coordinated and cooperative collecting strategies," and there are six
activities supporting it. In this case, various levels of the profession could easily concentrate upon each of these activities. For example, the study of "existing cooperative arrangements such as networks and consortia" could be a subject of full analysis by graduate archival students whereas the evaluation of "geographical and topical case studies to determine how cooperative collecting strategies can be developed and carried out" could be a focus of the meetings of regional archival associations. Some of the activities are much more difficult. The study of "the creation of interconnected documentation ... to determine if coordinated retention decisions can be made" will never be resolved unless the archival repositories make a stronger commitment to the work of research and development. The staffs of state archives, for example, are aware of the interconnection of federal, state, and local records and information but generally continue to make appraisal decisions on an individual basis. Such issues can be resolved only if state archives and the National Archives allow staff time to investigate such matters.

Goal two, "the administration of archival programs to ensure the preservation of all records of enduring value," in some ways, is the heart of the task force report. It aims at the basic needs for the development of the archival profession; this article's recommendations could fit into this, since it concerns the ability of the profession to foster planning, research, and development. For example, one of the strategies is to "encourage the continued development of a body of professional literature" —a need that all levels of the profession must work to meet. The national and regional archival associations need to evaluate whether present means of publishing literature is sufficient. Are the American Archivist, Midwestern Archivist, Provenance, and Archivaria an adequate number of journals for North American archivists to publish? Would it be possible for expanded Historical Records Advisory Boards to
encourage research by providing funds to focus upon specific statewide needs? Would not institutional research and development units better support the encouragement of "archival institutions and granting agencies to publish case studies of projects or other studies in archival science?"

The final area of access is, perhaps, one of the easiest goals of the report to consider since it concentrates upon communication. One of the strategies is to "develop communication between archivists and the user community," an area often discussed but seldom adequately studied. The regional archival associations, for example, could make an effort to attract wider participation of user groups in their organizations and meetings. The Historical Records Advisory Boards need to include as full participants representatives of the user community. And archival graduate programs could have students carefully analyze the past and present uses of archival materials to assist archivists in planning for the future.

All of this, however, is dependent upon the profession's possessing a carefully articulated set of goals and priorities and a national focus and mechanism for coordinating the accomplishment of those goals and priorities. Without a national planning committee, the chances for the improvement of the profession's status or resources—or even self-image—are significantly poorer. The work of the GAP Task Force represents an opportunity to put the archival profession on a new and more secure footing and to help foster the preservation of the nation's documentary heritage. The task force's report deserves, for this reason, the profession's complete and serious attention, not for three or six months but over the next several years. Archivists must realize that planning is important and that planning is an active and continuous process. Every archivist needs to monitor, support, and encourage the ongoing work of the task force. Its work is important enough to demand that archivists not be spectators but active participants.
NOTES


6 Mary Lynn McCree and Timothy Walch, eds., "Setting Priorities for Historical Records: A


9 *Planning for the Archival Profession*, 4.

10 This committee is discussed in *Planning for the Archival Profession*, 53-55.


15 Read, for example, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies (New York: Warner Books, 1982).

16 One could argue that the National Archives has played such a role. That is undoubtedly true for the formative years of the profession as shown in Donald R. McCoy, The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents 1934-1968 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). Over the past decade or so the National Archives has been the focus of, rather than the leader of, the archival profession. With independence, it can regain, perhaps, its rightful role as a professional leader.


19 Planning for the Archival Profession, 13.
The framework for such cooperation has been laid, but archivists need to commit to it and to begin to put it into practice. See Margaret S. Child, "Reflections on Cooperation Among Professions," American Archivist 46 (Summer 1983): 286-92 and Frank B. Burke, "Archival Cooperation," ibid. 46 (Summer 1983): 293-305.


Ibid., 41-42.


Such as Clark A. Elliott, "Citation Patterns and Documentation for the History of Science: Some Methodological Considerations," American Archivist 44 (Spring 1981): 131-42.