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## Short Subjects: The Archival Superhero

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## SHORT SUBJECTS



### FEATURE

#### THE ARCHIVAL SUPERHEROES

Over the past few years it seems impossible to open an archival journal and not read about the need for archivists to develop highly specific skills. A current example is the call insisting that we, as a profession, develop planning and managerial talents. Archivists have been challenged not merely to plan and manage, but to plan well, and manage our resources even better. Conservation is a second example of an area where proponents have spoken at length about the need for archivists to develop highly specific aptitudes. The need within an archives for an appreciation of abilities such as planning and management or conservation is incontrovertible. To say this, however, leaves as many questions unanswered as it resolves. There are many skills, some natural and some learned, that an archivist may have need to call upon in order to complete a particular day's work successfully. The critical question is not whether archivists must be aware of the need for such abilities, but where do they fit in the overall pattern of skills required by an archivist.

The question is more than an academic one. When proponents of a particular aptitude speak or write, they often do so with a missionary zeal. The idea that their activity is a subset of a larger group of beneficial skills often disappears. In its place a group of underlying assumptions seems to exist; assumptions which boil down to a belief that in order to be a good archivist one needs foremost to be knowledgeable of the author's sacred cow. Those who

lack the aptitude simply will not do. To be a good archivist one must be a good planner, and a better manager. Not to master completely the subject of conservation will, the assumption seems to run, leave an archivist unclean in spirit. Those of us too clumsy to use a microspatula properly or too addled to draw up an efficient organization chart are forever doomed to be second rate.<sup>1</sup>

Assumptions like these, which claim either explicitly or implicitly that an archivist must master highly specific tools, useful in the profession, deserve very careful scrutiny. Richard Berner has written that there are only two archival skills: description and arrangement, and appraisal.<sup>2</sup> By extension, everything else an archivist does can be learned from somebody else, who likely does it better than an archivist. Planning and management, as well as conservation, are susceptible to this dictum. Business schools regularly demand that their students study the processes of planning and management. Theory and practice are used to give students a firm understanding of how to accomplish these tasks. Conservation is rapidly becoming a specialized field, requiring individuals knowledgeable in science and also possessing a journeyman's understanding of crafts such as the binding of rare books. Archivists, just like any other professional group, can draw upon others' knowledge. Yet, because we are a distinct group, archivists will not find such tasks at the nucleus of our work. Nor will reading a few books, perusing a few articles, or listening to a few exhortations at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting, make us experts. To write this is not to express something surprising. Had a student desired to become extraordinarily proficient in disciplines such as planning and management or conservation, he should have spent his graduate career studying business administration or chemistry, not archival theory and practice.

A number of valuable abilities are merely tools which an archivist employs in order better to implement a different set of core skills. An archivist who has mastered our profession's essential abilities and can also adeptly manipulate other profession's tools, is a fortunate person. All of us admire, and probably wish we could employ, such a



multi-talented person. Most archivists, however, are more limited. While we may emulate the archival superheroes, we ourselves will never be faster than a speeding accountant, more powerful than an engineer, nor leap tall stacks in a single bound. Rather, we will move forward slowly, painfully dragging our collections along behind us, while cursing the file clerk who put transfer cases on top of a twelve foot shelf. We should take note of the tools available to us through the work of non-archival professions, but it is unlikely we will ever become complete masters of them.

Admitting all of this is not a confession that archivists are somehow inferior. Rather, it is a realistic look at what we as a profession do and what is unique to that activity. To say that an archivist cannot successfully use all of the subsidiary tools available to him is not to say he is a bad archivist. Let the radical proposition be heard that a truly good archivist can also be a truly bad planner, and a worse manager. Let us breathe softly the heresy that a thorough understanding of the chemistry and a deft touch with a microspatula are not really at the heart of what an archivist knows and does. Berner's definition of the essence of archives as description, arrangement, and appraisal is undoubtedly controversial. His choice of focus will not please everyone, especially archivists who do not describe, arrange, or appraise. However, his basic assumption, that there is a nucleus of archival skills, is sound. As a profession we need either to accept Berner's definition or to enter into a dialogue leading to a better definition of our unique knowledge. Everything else we should see in the perspective given us through this vision.

To divide archival skills from those available through other profession's knowledge does not denigrate the importance of those other disciplines. Archival agencies should plan well. Archival agencies should be well managed. Conservation is important. But, we must realize that these and other skills are tasks at which archivists may not be personally adept and those which probably are not worth spending great quantities of our time developing. If the immediate problem before us is straightforward, let us simply borrow the knowledge of others and resolve the issue. If the problems are

more complex, archivists should not hesitate to bring in other professionals trained in the necessary arts. If we have need of foreign skills, let us freely import immigrant labor, either as consultants or as permanent members of an archive's staff. Archivists themselves should reserve their greatest energy for the learning and advancement of the essential domestic handicrafts through which our profession is defined.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It could be argued that the literature on the subject of sampling shares the devotional aspects found in discussions of management and conservation. It could be argued, but one advantage of authorship is the ability to choose not to discuss one's personal sacred cow. Let someone else make the point.

<sup>2</sup>Richard A. Berner, Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983, 4.