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## HIGHER EDUCATION'S ARCHIVAL MISSING LINKS

Wilma R. Slaight

In recent years articles have celebrated the growth and quality of college and university archives, so much so that a session at the 1982 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists focused on whether higher education was documented out of proportion to other aspects of American life. As part of an ongoing discussion of this topic it would be instructive to investigate the distribution of academic archives and to explore ways colleges and universities without archives can better care for their records. Throughout this discussion it is important to remember that college and university archives are not established to provide documentation on the subject of higher education; they are established to care for the records of their institutions. That these records also provide information on the history of higher education is an additional benefit, not the archives' primary goal.

No one will dispute the increase in numbers of college and university archives. This growth, documented in surveys by the Society of American Archivists' College and University Archives Committee,<sup>1</sup> is reflected in directories published by the society. To keep things simple, entries in these directories will be accepted at face value and aspects of what the author will call the Cinderella syndrome will be ignored. Included among the sufferers of the Cinderella syndrome are archives in institutions with combined archives and special collections departments in which the archives is treated as the neglected stepsister getting the leftover resources, time, and attention; archives which appear in directories clothed in their fancy ball dress but which in reality exist in rags, underfed, understaffed, and

often ignored; and archives whose programs had little more substance than Cinderella's finery and vanished after a similarly short existence.

Putting aside the question of the quality of archives in those institutions which at least nod in the direction of having an archival program, it is interesting to note which institutions, or rather which types of institutions, do not have archives. A comparison of the entries for a number of states in The College Blue Book for 1981 and the 1980 Directory of College and University Archives in the United States and Canada (taking into consideration those academic institutions listed in the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) Directory as having institutional records show that almost all four year colleges and universities have some kind of archival program. Of the 1,206 institutions listed in The College Blue Book for the states of Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin, 443 (or 37 percent of the total) were in the College and University Archives Directory and/or the NHPRC Directory. Of the 763 remaining--that is, those who do not report archival programs--only 104 are four year colleges or universities with over 1,500 students. The other 659--86 percent of the institutions without archives--tended to be junior colleges, community colleges, vocational and technical schools, and small colleges with under 1,500 students. Branch campuses of universities, somewhat more difficult to verify because their archives are sometimes included in the entry for the archival program of the main campus, also often seem to be among the missing. These are rather startling figures.

Can we really claim higher education is adequately documented if records in whatever quantity or quality for these types of institutions are not preserved? Such schools enroll hundreds of thousands of students,<sup>2</sup> and they often have a significant economic and social impact on their locality. Are we fostering an elitist history of higher education if we ignore these



institutions?

If we agree that documentation of the full variety of higher education is essential, is there a better way, or another way, to accomplish this goal than the current system under which the institution bears the full weight of caring for its own records? While every institution should be concerned with the management of its records, given economic realities can archivists in good conscience recommend that every institution undertake a full archival program with the space, staff, and financial commitments such a program would entail? What alternatives can be suggested to people from the small junior college, the moderate-sized music conservatory, and the large vocational-technical institute?

There are at least four options worthy of consideration: (1) deposit or gift of the institution's records to an existing repository, (2) contracting out for archival services, (3) using existing archival networks or creating new ones, and (4) entering into a cooperative agreement with similar institutions or other components of a larger entity.

For some institutions the simplest and perhaps wisest answer may be to place their records under the care of an established repository. This could take the form of a gift or a deposit. Certainly before any agreement is complete and an instrument of transfer or deposit is signed, the usual discussions covering ownership and copyright, terms of access, kind of processing expected, and disposition of duplicates and other records not of enduring value should take place. In addition, there should be agreement on the provision for later additions to the collection, whether and under what conditions items from or portions of the records would be returned to the originating institution, and what is to happen to the records if the repository ceases to exist. The institution placing its records at the repository may be asked to pay some or all of the processing or storage costs.

For the academic institution this results in its

records receiving excellent professional care at less cost than support of an in-house archival program would entail. Such a solution might be ideal for a small private college, especially a church-related school whose records could be placed in the repository which cares for the records of the church which sponsors the school. This sort of arrangement is often made for records of predecessor schools, or schools which no longer exist. There is no reason why mutually acceptable arrangements could not be reached for records of schools which continue to function.

The second option, contracting out for archival services, would avoid one of the main drawbacks of the first, for it would allow the records of the institution to remain on campus. Under this option a trained archivist from outside the institution would process the records, prepare finding aids, and help establish record schedules for future accessions. A detailed procedures manual would help a non-professional on campus retrieve information and give the records minimal care in the intervals between the visits of the archivist. An archivist with commitments to several institutions could find this an alternative to a more traditional job. Consultant agencies also might be willing to enter into such contracts. Archival service centers--a much discussed but so far rarely available aid to archives--which could provide processing and other archival services might provide an attractive variation on this option.

Archival networks may also help archivists broaden the documentation of higher education and improve the quality of care records of academic institutions receive. Most of the existing archival networks deal with public records and many divide states along geographical lines. Many states also have systems of publicly supported community colleges or technical institutes placed geographically so that all citizens have reasonably easy access to at least one of these schools. Would it be unrealistic to propose that existing network centers collect the



records of these schools? They are, after all, public institutions of recognized local importance. In states like New York which do not have an archival network but do have a system of community colleges as part of the State University of New York (SUNY), could a network be established to handle the records of all the component parts of the SUNY system?<sup>3</sup>

The other option, a cooperative agreement with similar institutions or other components of a larger entity, may be especially applicable for branch campuses. An archives on the main campus could keep selected records documenting the purpose and strongest programs of the branches. A cooperative arrangement between similar institutions--all vocational schools or all Catholic schools in a geographic area, for example--might be possible. These institutions might want to share the services of an archivist and order supplies jointly. However, any such cooperative arrangement would have to take into account or overcome the natural competition for students and other scarce resources which exists between similar institutions.

None of these options is without problems. There may be any number of other alternatives. The point is that while archivists can not play fairy godmothers generating the resources and commitment necessary for an archival program with a wave of the magic wand, they can begin to think about and explore options open to those whose institutions cannot or will not support a full in-house archival program. Now is not the time to rest on laurels, with congratulations on the thoroughness of the documentation of higher education--not while institutions fail to manage their records properly because a full archival program seems beyond their means and whole areas of higher education remain underdocumented or ignored.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a brief review of these surveys and their

findings, see Nicholas Burkel and J. Frank Cook, "A Profile of College and University Archives in the United States," American Archivist 45 (Fall 1982): 410-12.

<sup>2</sup>In 1980, two year junior and community colleges accounted for 37.2 percent of the students in the United States. U.S. Department of Education, The Condition of Education: 1982 Edition, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>In May 1981, representatives of institutions within the State University of New York met in Albany. The conference, designed to raise the archival consciousness of the participants, included a discussion of the Wisconsin network, but no plans for a New York network emerged.