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## Finding Our Voice: Pleading the Value of Archives

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## Introduction

### Finding Our Voice: Pleading the Value of Archives

Richard Pearce-Moses

This special issue of *Provenance* considers advocacy, a core archival function.<sup>1</sup> As archivists, we must be advocates – for our collections, our programs, and our profession. As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, an advocate is one “who pleads, intercedes, or speaks for, or in behalf of, another, . . . who defends, maintains, publicly recommends, or raises his voice in behalf of a proposal or tenet.”<sup>2</sup> A significant part of our time and energy must be invested in defending, recommending, and raising our voices for archives.

Archivists have clear, specific guidelines and best practices for much of their work. Long standing traditions of provenance and original order protect the context of the records. DACS and EAD give clear directions on how to describe archival collections. Temperature and humidity controls let archivists know appropriate storage conditions to protect the collections. However, archivists have no such standards for advocacy. Nor will they ever. No rules or magic words can guarantee success, no single approach will work every time.

Case studies may inspire with the promise that – at least in some instances – advocacy works and is worth the effort. Still, every situation is different, and what works in one instance may not others. The programs and collections and different, the people and personalities are different. Most of the articles in this issue point to the Georgia Archives as an exemplar, which escaped being closed but survived at reduced capacity. Similar efforts to protect the Arizona State Archives in 2009 were not successful, when the newly dedicated building was closed to the public for nearly six months. The lack of a formula for success does not spell doom. Rather, it merely suggests the complexity of being successful advocate. It is a call for creativity and energy to find a way to be successful. It also serves as a reminder that, as a difficult problem, some efforts will fail and require perseverance.

Three important themes run throughout these articles: advocates must have a clear message, they must build and maintain relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, and they must have and pursue a plan.

First, effective advocacy is less about pleading for support and more about explaining the benefit of archives. Many archivists see advocacy as a means to increased support, especially increased budgets. Instead, the message should focus on a positive expression of the value of

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<sup>1</sup> The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) established advocacy – inextricably tied to outreach and promotion – as one of the seven core domain of archival profession. The ACA expects archivists to be able to analyze and describe the benefits of the collections, help stakeholders understand and encourage their support for archives, promote use of and publicize the collections. Paraphrased from *Handbook for Archival Certification* (Academy of Certified Archivists, 2012): 22. Similarly, the Society of American Archivists “believes that the archival profession must take an active role in advocating for the public policies and resources necessary to ensure that these records are preserved and made accessible.” Professional Issues & Advocacy, <http://www2.archivists.org/initiatives>, accessed June 24, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> CD-ROM ver. 3.1 (Oxford University Press, 2004).

archives: protecting citizens' rights, holding organizations and governments accountable, and ensuring that historical information and cultural memory remain accessible into the future.<sup>3</sup>

Many people are unfamiliar with archives, so their value is not readily apparent. Archivists are quick to point out the historical value of the records. But, the idea of records may connote bureaucracy and paperwork – virtues many would never celebrate. For some, history is a warm and fuzzy diversion that can be cut in light of hard, cold budgetary needs for health care and food. We must have a clear understanding of the value of archives to different people. For others, the records may be better destroyed to hide smoking guns and embarrassing facts. Many people have heard Santayana's warning that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," but few take the time to study and learn from history.

As Dianne Cannestra and Kaye Minchew point out in their essays, the Friends of Georgia Archives and History needed help navigating the legislative process and engaged a professional lobbying firm to help develop a clear, targeted message. Vivian Price Saffold discusses the message the Georgia Genealogical Society communicated through their activities. The archival community had little input into Governor Nathan Deal's proposal, and many had opinions about how to fix the problem. Instead, the lobbyist counseled the importance of a simple, consistent message supporting the governor's proposal rather than a more complete, but possibly confusing, message that explained the program or advocated for specific aspects of the program.

Second, archivists must build and maintain relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Patrons of all types, ranging from genealogists to academics and corporations to government agencies are a broad base. No doubt the governor was surprised – and realized he had a problem – when more than a hundred people filled his chambers for the Georgia Archives Month proclamation two weeks after the Secretary of State announced the Archives would be closed. Representatives contacted by constituents triggered questions about the issue to the leadership, letting them know the matter wasn't isolated to a few individuals. Those relationships take time to build, but that time is an essential part of the process.

In addition to the many voices, a few prominent voices are essential. Archivists must build relationships with others who may be better positioned to speak on our behalf. In many ways, archivists cannot be advocates for their own programs because such efforts may appear self-centered or motivated by personal gain. Many of the key stakeholders may not be convinced by facts, logical argument, or explanation. Decisions that affect the archives may be governed more by emotions more than reason, by politics rather than principle. Allies that are close to those key stakeholders may have more influence based on friendship, business ties, or political allegiances. As Courtney Chartier and Sarah Quigley point out in their article, the voices of major corporations carried significant weight with members of the Assembly.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Professional Issues & Advocacy, Professional Issues & Advocacy, <http://www2.archivists.org/initiatives>, accessed June 24, 2013.

Finally, as Chartier and Quigley note, archivists must have a plan for advocacy. Too often, advocacy is effectively crisis management, responding to specific events. Proactively developing a plan allows time to consider a range of options, find ways to refine the message, and identify and educate a broad range of stakeholders. The disasters caused by Hurricane Katrina made apparent that those relationships with emergency responders should be established long before any emergency happens. It is impossible to help the responders – strangers – understand the value and unique challenges of the collections in the midst of crisis. Similarly, it is essential to build and maintain those relationships with core stakeholders who will regularly support the archives.

David Carmicheal describes the result when those relationships cannot be sustained. That challenge is the most difficult. Advocacy is hard work and takes time. Sustained efforts are difficult, given the lack of immediate rewards and more pressing demands on our time. Still, no matter how pressing or urgent those other tasks, the important – the essential – work of advocacy cannot be put aside. Relationships must be built and maintained to continue to convey the message of the value of archives.

Jeremy Brett and Jasmine Jones report on two surveys to discover archivists' understanding of and attitudes towards advocacy, how they advocate, and problems they face. Based on their findings, there's need to advocate for advocacy in the profession.

We must find our voice, to articulate a clear, simple message to plead the value of archives, to recommend and defend the archival record. We must develop a plan to communicate that message to a wide range of stakeholders and to the public at large. And, most important, we must recognize that advocacy is an equally important part of the archival enterprise and that it demands time and energy to implement and sustain the plan. As more and more people understand the value of archives, support will follow.

**Richard Pearce-Moses** has been a professional archivist for more than thirty years. He has worked with a variety of subjects and formats, including photography, regional history, Native American art and culture, and state and local government. For the past decade, he has focused on digital archives and libraries, including finding ways to capture and preserve digital publications on the Web and new ways to automate processing electronic records. He is currently the Director of the Master of Archival Studies program at Clayton State University in Morrow, Georgia. He served as President of the Society of American Archivists, is an SAA Fellow, and has been a member of the Academy of Certified Archivist since its inception. Library of Congress named him a Digital Preservation Pioneer in 2008 and the American Library Association presented him with the Kilgour Award for Research in Library and Information Technology in 2007. He was the principal author of *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (2005). Pearce-Moses has a Master of Science in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2001), a Master of American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin (1987), and a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin (1976).