

“The Imperative of Challenging Absolutes” in Graduate Archival Education Programs: Issues for Educators and the Profession

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Abstract

This article reflects on various themes discussed by the authors of papers and the audience at the Archival Educators’ Day, and a related program session at the 1999 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Pittsburgh. It posits a gulf between archivists in academia and in the workplace that needs to be addressed, crossing various misunderstandings of discipline versus profession; theory versus practice; education versus training; and “new” recordkeeping, electronic-records models versus “traditional” cultural, heritage, and historical orientations for the profession. It asserts that both academics and practitioners may be overlooking the importance of educating students in conducting the in-depth contextual research required to be first-class working archivists.

Archival education should not be something happening in the ivory tower, safely out of the sight and minds of hard-working practitioners in archival institutions. Neither should discussions by educators concerning the nature of archival education simply be about university politics or professors’ activities writ large. Defining archival education, and the nature of archival research, is, at its heart, about defining what kind of archivist the profession needs educators to produce and what kind of research the profession needs from educators and their students. These questions in turn beg bigger ones: what is the nature of the archival profession and its role in society at the start of the new millennium, and what does it need in terms of new practitioners and new knowledge in order to flourish in the Information Age?

That last question produces radically different answers across different countries, different times, different kinds of archival institutions, and different kinds of record-creating contexts. Moreover, it has increasingly been suggested

by external observers, as well as by some archivists, that archives—not unlike museums, galleries, libraries, historic sites, and other cultural agencies—actively construct the past. The collective documentary heritage is shaped inevitably by archivists according to the social and cultural norms of their age. Archives are thus active and contested sites that privilege certain stories and marginalize others, as stated most eloquently in the article by Eric Ketelaar. Archival educators are very much part of this contested dynamic, for they help “construct” the archivists who in turn shape society’s memories. That the archival profession needs (within this context) to explore what educators are doing, carefully and critically, and that educators equally need to state their goals and assumptions, openly and transparently, seems self-evident. Discussions dealing with archival education, then, are not about educators talking to one another while the “real work” goes on back at the archives. Ultimately, as Ketelaar discerns, it is about the kind of profession, archival institutions, and archival records that this generation wishes to create and pass on, and, in turn and more profoundly, how this will inevitably reflect, whether consciously or unconsciously, how and why society (organizations and individuals) creates its own archives and nurture its memories.¹

To further this exploration and professional dialogue, some fifty archival educators met on August 24, 1999 to discuss graduate archival education programs. Two days later, the highlights from this Educators’ Day were presented to a session at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting to gain feedback from working archivists. I was one of two summary speakers at the end of the Educators’ Day as well as one of the presenters at the SAA session. What follows are my blended reflections from both occasions, based on the papers I heard then, rather than the revised versions that may be appearing in this issue of the *American Archivist* or elsewhere. The tone also remains one of conversational commentary without extensive scholarly apparatus.

Being a summary speaker at any conference can be difficult, but not this time. As many of the papers presented at the Educators’ Day are being published and almost all are available on the hosting University of Pittsburgh’s website, I felt no compulsion in August 1999—as I feel none now—to mention every participating author by name, to summarize every argument, or to recognize every contribution. Rather the opposite: the remarks that follow are more general reflections about what we, as educators, try to teach as well as what we may not teach and should, based on what I heard in Pittsburgh, to be sure, but going further afield as well.

¹ See Eric Ketelaar, “Archivistics Research Saving the Profession,” appearing elsewhere in this issue of the *American Archivist*, as well as his probing essay, “Archivalisation and Archiving,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 54–61.

These thoughts reflect both my experience and naivety. As I told my educator colleagues, I was probably the newest (I did not say the youngest) and certainly the least experienced graduate-level archival educator in the room at Pittsburgh, having then just completed my first year teaching at the University of Manitoba. But I was also probably the most experienced in the room as a working archivist and archival manager—with the exception perhaps of Eric Ketelaar, Barbara Craig, and maybe one or two others—with well over two decades in the archival trenches. Readers will have to judge for themselves whether the experience or naivety is ascendant in the following pages.

One striking theme in several papers and throughout the discussions at Pittsburgh is that there is too much knowledge to teach aspiring archivists at the master's level, with some students, it was reported, now actually adding a third year to a two-year master's program, or an additional certificate level beyond the degree at some schools, in order to be able to take more of the ever-growing list of options that we educators eagerly offer. Facing this avalanche of courses, the master's research thesis has become optional for most programs, and even actively discouraged, so that more courses may be taken. Research into pressing professional issues, considered rightly by all to be essential, is assigned primarily to the doctoral level, with only the best and the brightest of the master's students getting research experience on faculty mega-projects.

Where does this all end? From the many challenges facing the archival and interrelated information professions, as presented at Pittsburgh, we could easily double the number of course options (or requirements) from twenty (as at one well-endowed school) to forty, or more. And we could multiply the number of research questions without end. Maybe educators have been going about this in the wrong way, asking the wrong question. Rather than asking “what does an archivist need to know” and then attempting to create courses and more courses to cram in all the accumulated and latest research-based knowledge, perhaps we should be asking, “how does an archivist need to think, and why?” My colleague at the University of Manitoba, Tom Nesmith, has written that professional education “should be about thinking creatively within a field, more than about covering as much as possible of the accepted knowledge and techniques in the field. Professional education is not really about teaching the profession's knowledge exhaustively. As educator Jacques Barzun says, ‘the truth is, when all is said and done, one does not *teach a subject*, one teaches a student how to learn it.’” This approach advocates, then, a blend of the humanist and cultural perspective that is (or should be) at the heart of any university education, with professional knowledge and practical competence.²

²Tom Nesmith, “‘Professional Education in the Most Expansive Sense’: What Will the Archivist Need to Know in the Twenty-First Century,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 92 emphasis in original. I am grateful to Tom Nesmith for comments he made on an earlier draft of this essay, and for his leadership and inspiration in the Archival Studies program at the University of Manitoba.

There seems to be a growing support for this broader humanist kind of education, as advocated and practiced by Nesmith. Principal Bill Leggett of Queen’s University, one of Canada’s Ivy League institutions, reported last year on two major international conferences of university, business, and government leaders recently convened to develop strategies to meet the challenges of the wired global world and marketplace in the new millennium. These leaders discussed how best to equip graduates for professional success and future leadership in this rapidly changing and volatile environment. Archivists need to listen carefully to the conclusions of these leaders:

Speakers at these conferences, whether representing the interests of the corporate sector, government, or academia, echoed one another in a remarkable consensus when articulating the skills they believe are essential for achievement in any field. Repeated emphasis was given to communication and organization skills, team work and language facility. But there was another area of consensus that spoke to something more elusive, something intangible. This was the realm of attributes and values, a collection of qualities more to be inculcated than taught: comfort with ambiguity, intellectual resilience and a willingness to fail and learn from failure; a heightened sense of ethics, historical perspective and a sensitivity to cultural differences; critical thinking and problem-solving abilities; an understanding of how ‘knowledge’ is created, and the imperative of challenging absolutes.³

In archival terms, this focus on creating an archival mindset, nourishing appropriate attitudes and values, and developing an openness to continual learning and problem-solving, rather than focusing on digesting a large and growing, ever-changing, and soon outdated body of professional knowledge and practice, reflects a more humanist, cultural, historical approach to professional education, as advocated, if I do not put words unfairly in their mouths, by Eric Ketelaar and Peter Wosh, as well as by Nesmith. It is not about learning all the rules, regulations, processes, and procedures of a myriad of archival functions, activities, and media, but rather more about challenging and changing them. Yet how many archival employers and, indeed, senior professional archivists “out there” really welcome new employees filled with an “imperative of challenging absolutes”? How many have any “comfort with ambiguity”? I wonder if all archival education programs themselves also share Bill Leggett’s broad humanism, or is their focus rather on teaching absolute rules, one-sided methodologies, and allegedly universal theories?

At the SAA session following the Educators’ Day, some senior professionals asserted that they wanted graduates ready to arrange, box, and describe collections—to be, in effect, junior versions of themselves, although with more youth and energy, who would immediately roll up their sleeves and

³ Bill Leggett, “The Case for a ‘Broadly Based’ Education,” *Queen’s Alumni Review*, (March/April 1999): 7.

help hard-pressed professionals cope with the horrendous backlogs most institutions face. In other cases, employers are hoping for the opposite, that graduates can step in cold and solve all the problems of electronic records management, global networks, digitization, standards development, and appraisal dilemmas almost by waving their magic (i.e., educated) wand. The former expectation underestimates the benefit of archival education: I can assert—from both the education and employer sides of the fence—that no one needs two years of graduate-level archival education on top of a sound four-year undergraduate degree to arrange and describe collections according to traditional methods. And the latter expectation rather overestimates what junior, novice staff members can fairly be expected to accomplish, especially when seasoned veterans with two decades or more of professional experience have struggled with these issues with rather mixed success, or when major and well-funded collaborative research projects are now needed at universities to address them.

Perhaps we archival educators need to remind ourselves—and our employing colleagues—that while we may be training the leaders of tomorrow, that “tomorrow” starts five or ten years away when the students have gained experience and perspective in archival work and attained the decision-making stature of upper-middle or senior management. “Today,” now, as graduates are hired, they are junior entry-level archivists. The graduating archivist of course should be educated in the latest professional debates and archival research trends and methods in order to be supportive of (and junior partners in) testing field research and new solutions—a point to which I will return. The larger solutions will come, however, with rare exceptions, from the archival educators’ own research, from archival doctoral research, and from research by experienced practitioners. Such research is certainly an essential part of the archival educational role and essential in its results for the profession, but most concede that it will be professors and doctoral students, in alliance with other disciplines and professionals in the field, who will do this work. In this regard, I think the three-way model presented by Angelika Menne-Haritz is very suggestive,⁴ and may help us all get a clearer perspective on the roles of, and the research and educational foci for, the entry-level master’s students, the faculty of archival educators and their doctoral candidates, and practitioners and institutions in the working world.

Yet archivists—including new archivists graduating from our programs—are expected to do research on the job: hard, complex, scholarly research, not research into the issues of greatest interest to archival educators as seemed to be the overwhelming focus of the Pittsburgh discussions, but rather research required to do the actual archival work well. More than well, to do it better than it has traditionally been done, and so move the profession forward collectively,

⁴See Angelika Menne-Haritz, “Archival Training in a Changing World,” appearing elsewhere in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

especially given the complexities of recording media and records-creating entities in the Information Age. Indeed, such raising of the bar of accepted practice seems to me to be the *raison d'être* for having archival graduate education in the first place.

In this regard, I will assert that the fundamental (and foundational) characteristic of archival work is original research by archivists into the history and contemporary nature of archival records, record creators, recording media, and recordkeeping systems. It is not in the first instance about managing information, about preserving information, or about diffusing information. Those are secondary activities based on the primary research core and the contextual knowledge generated by such research activity.

Research for archivists in this mode may be defined as the methodological investigation of the individual human, institutional, and societal dimensions of recordkeeping and documentary artifacts over space and time. The purpose of such research is to discover or create new knowledge about records and their contexts, to permit a rigorous analysis and interpretation of the findings in light of past archival research scholarship, and to weigh or assess its relative value and its application to the business processes of the archives itself.

For appraisal, for description, and for specialized reference or access work, archivists undertake original research to discover the historical and contemporary functions and structures, organizational cultures, and key individuals, that or who may be considered either representative of the whole or, conversely, special or outstanding in some way. Whether within government, other institutions, or the larger society, these functions, structures, and individuals are always changing and evolving over time and space. These changing relationships must also be identified and evaluated. Archivists must do much of this research in advance of the related published historical or sociological knowledge, for historians, sociologists, and others are dependent on the prior work of archivists in producing their knowledge. Research into communication patterns and the nature and characteristics of recording media is also required, as well as research into organizational culture and information and recordkeeping systems, in all media, historically and in the present.

Based on knowledge gained by such research, the archivist determines (or appraises) the significance or value of the small portion of records from the larger whole that have lasting archival value and negotiates for their acquisition; and then describes the records in their full complexity of provenancial, functional, and subject context to make them accessible in more stimulating ways through exhibitions, publications, or richly layered web designs—all so that researchers may understand the significance of what they find in context against a far vaster whole from which the archival record was extracted. And archivists undertake research themselves directly into those very primary archival collections under their control in order to answer detailed and complex questions

received from the public or from government or the sponsor agency itself about historical figures, issues, controversies, and precedents.⁵

This “on-the-job” research and scholarly analysis is primarily historical in focus, but also incorporates research themes and methodologies from such fields as political science, sociology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, information technology, and media studies. These research skills, aptitudes, and abilities are (and were!) what I would be (and was!) looking for as a hiring employer at the National Archives of Canada, accompanied by the humanist flexibility, adaptability, and cultural mindset outlined by Principal Leggett—as well as, of course, knowledge of archival theory, practice, and tradition. (This is what we hope to hone and inculcate by retaining the mandatory research-based master’s thesis at the University of Manitoba, and its associated activities and skill building, both collaborative and individual.)

Yet I did not hear much about this kind of research at the “Working Meeting of Graduate Archival Educators” in Pittsburgh, or even about its utility for doing the core work of the archivist well, and indeed, one hopes, doing it better than in the past—except from Angelika Menne-Haritz concerning the value that the Marburg Archives School in Germany places on such research and historical training.⁶ Do we assume this will be learned “on the job”? If so, such an assumption betrays ignorance of the enormous complexity and subtlety of the research skills and historical knowledge required of the archivist. Do we assume that this research-based knowledge and ability will be covered by undergraduate courses or entry prerequisites? Do we perhaps assume too much, as David Wallace reveals rather starkly in his paper? Perhaps as educators, we need to discuss much more the kind of research the archivist actually does on (and thus needs for) the job. *Research by archivists* in the daily work is not, in short, the same as *archival research* by educators, or doctoral candidates, or senior professional practitioners. In focusing so much educator discussion, energy, and effort on major archival research projects, which the profession needs, to be sure, and which also bring (perhaps not incidentally) grants, recognition,

⁵ Much fuller statements of this research-based and scholarly approach to archival work were articulated by Tom Nesmith, “Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982): 5–26; and Terry Cook, “From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 28–49. Nesmith argued that archivists should be a kind of historian specializing not in the subject content of records as “regular” historians do, but rather in the history of the actual record itself and of patterns of recorded communication over time. Cook posited that historical skills and methodologies applied to archival records, creators, and their many rich interrelationships would allow archivists to create new contextual knowledge to perform better all archival functions and activities. Both essays are reprinted in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press 1993), which also contains other examples of this contextualizing, research-based approach to archives in working practice. How this approach translates from workplace into educational programs is best outlined in Tom Nesmith, “Hugh Taylor’s Contextual Idea for Archives and the Foundation of Graduate Education in Archival Studies,” *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Barbara Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992).

⁶ See Menne-Haritz, “Archival Training in a Changing World.”

tenure, and promotions to professors, have educators overlooked the research actually done by archivists, which is, therefore essential to inculcate in their students?

In North America, where the overwhelming majority of archivists in the past half-century have been educated as historians, supplemented with some "on-the-job" or summer institute training in archival procedures and techniques, the desire over the past decade to put the "archival" into archival education is laudable, and certainly there is a large enough body of conceptual, historical, and methodological literature to master on that score. But has the pendulum now swung too far in the opposite direction? Is it good enough to leave the education of the critical "research by the archivist" to chance, varying undergraduate courses and degrees, inconsistent and uneven prerequisites, perhaps a single half-course in historical methods and historiography that some archival programs feature, or simply to "on-the-job" training—hoping that a kind of happy osmosis will occur from working with records? This radical swing of the pendulum is not one supported by Europeans, the home of archival education programs for many decades, even centuries, that North Americans now are mirroring for their "archival science" aspects. Let us not forget the other half of making a complete European archivist, where the ideal candidate has graduate degrees in both history (or similar research-based field) and archival science. Archivists, above all others, should know the wisdom of not jettisoning their traditions, including their educational ones.

There is another dimension of the relationship of research by working archivists and archival research by educators. If educators hope to have their own research in major university-based projects read, understood, critiqued, and implemented, they need archivists in the profession who are comfortable with research, who have well-honed research skills, and who indeed belong to a profession so defined by their very presence as research-oriented rather than process-oriented. It is the rich contextual-focused research knowledge of working archivists, moreover, that supplies the data and case studies for the models and concepts being developed, or tested, by university-based researchers. Are educators watering down the nurturing of the very research skills that their own work implies is important for the profession?

One key assumption that many educators seem to make about the nature of the profession, and thus the design of their courses and programs for educating new archivists for that profession, relates to the importance of the enormous information technology challenges of our time. There is the feeling that rather more class time needs to be spent on computers, information management, recordkeeping requirements, and the like, and rather less on the historical, heritage, and cultural dimensions of archives. During the Educators' Day, the point was made that roughly one-third of the graduate programs that meet

the SAA and ACA pre-appointment education guidelines are located in history departments and two-thirds in library science schools or faculties, with the direction of growth slightly but increasingly in favor of the latter. A sub-text through the day, that bubbled to the surface a couple of times, viewed this trend as a good thing, and as evidence of a move away from our cultural and historical past and towards our information management future. The view was expressed as well that the history-based programs were not only vaguely passé, but not as varied, diverse, cross-disciplinary, and collaborative as the library or information science-based programs—even though some history-based educators protested this assertion and some library school educators conceded that collaborative research was not quite the gleaming panacea.

Beyond that straw in the wind, David Wallace's statistical work seems to reveal a related disconnection between, on the one hand, the message of many archival educators and theorists, that stresses the common features of the archivist and records manager, or indeed other information or IT professionals, blended or blurred into a kind of common "record keeper" professional, as mentioned above; and, on the other hand, the desires of students themselves for their professional work placements, despite being heavily exposed in their studies to this "recordkeeping" agenda. While one-quarter of the students are unsure what they want to do, fully one-third want to work in special collections, or work as manuscript curators or in arrangement and description, and another one-third want to work in cultural, heritage, or fine arts institutions. A negligible number want to work in archives in the government or corporate sectors, or in health, religious, or science and technology fields, and none want to work in the areas of legal and financial records.⁷ It seems clear, despite the recent strong emphasis in professional literature and certainly in the nature of many archival graduate education programs' course descriptions, that we educators are not attracting to archival programs people aiming to be records managers, or new recordkeepers, and that careers as recordkeepers are not seen as a desirable path by an overwhelming majority of the students themselves. Without denying the validity of the need for radically new approaches to recordkeeping in our society, and the legitimacy of much archival research in this area in the past decade (I've done some of it myself!), perhaps here again the new is being embraced at the expense of the cultural heritage core of the profession traditionally. Must it be "either/or," as the choice is increasingly put among educators and the profession at large? Can we not rise to making it "both/and"? Can we not sort out recordkeeping means for cultural and historical ends? For now, many of our students are saying no, and so are some employing professionals.

I also heard in Pittsburgh (among such working professionals) concern

⁷See David Wallace, "Survey of Archives and Records Management Graduate Students at Ten Universities in the United States and Canada," appearing elsewhere in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

that archival education is too theoretical or conceptual, that it spends too much time on ideas and not enough on work-oriented training. Several things may be at play here. One is the profession's traditionally pragmatic, hands-on approach, but this attitude unfortunately can also blur the borders of professional training as given in workshops, summer institutes, and community college post-secondary courses with those of professional education as given in graduate-level post-degree programs. To me there has always been a worrisome anti-intellectualism in the archival profession that would as soon ignorantly mock the brilliant postmodern insights into our professional culture of a Jacques Derrida or an Eric Ketelaar as try to understand them. Yet, the line between theory and practice, education and training is not that clear, nor are the two sides entirely black and white.

Let me take training versus education first. The balance—or perhaps creative tension—between the two has another personal dimension for me, and a comparative one. Other members of my immediate family are now involved in university faculties of education and law, and we talk a lot about education, archives, and law. The comparisons are interesting. Like archives, or indeed medicine or nursing, education and law are not pure disciplines, as are history or physics, mathematics or philosophy, but involve a practical application of a body of professional knowledge. These professions have all had some difficulty establishing their credentials as university-based disciplines. For example, until this century, at least in Canada, law was often learned by apprenticeship, not by university education. Not until the 1960s in Ontario was the one-year Normal School course offered after high-school graduation (which then qualified one to be a schoolteacher), *finally* replaced by at least five years (and two degrees) of university education. Bachelor of Science degrees in nursing have only outstripped the old Registered Nurse vocational training approach in the past decade. Clearly North American archivists are following a similar path as have these other practical professions—the so-called professional schools at university—by replacing apprenticeship and on-the-job training with graduate-level university education and articulating a formal, scholarly discipline. Yet I wonder if the profession as a whole is ready to make as clear a break from its past—its apprenticeship and training-centered past? Certainly no one would *now* suggest that the study of law or medicine or education should not have theoretical, research, ethical, historical, and cultural dimensions to the purely practical and technical and professional and hands-on. Why not the same for archives as well? What are we afraid of?

As to theory versus practice, the other side of the coin, I think that we must reject the schizophrenic approach. Archival educators focusing only on arcane theoretical purity—a kind of arid neo-Scholasticism—do their students a disservice, as their future employers will quickly point out. Equally, archival educators proceeding only pragmatically, on what seems to satisfy today's users, or

sponsors, or publics, without a defensible conceptual core of theoretical consistency, leave archivists and their employing institutions exposed, in this era of “culture wars,” to severe criticism, even ridicule, and to acquiring and preserving for posterity a poorer and less-reliable record, and one that posterity will understand less well and use less imaginatively. There is a healthy skepticism in the archival profession about theory, and I think that from my travels I could observe that this skepticism is most pronounced in the United States, perhaps fittingly so as the home of James’s and Dewey’s pragmatism, of American know-how, of rolling up the sleeves and getting the job done. I have some sympathy with that view, especially when theory takes the guise of a formulaic imposition taking little cognizance of workplace realities or differences of time and place. I worked for twenty-three years in a national archives where producing concrete practical results was what counted—not endless speculation as to why we were doing the work, but getting on with it. Yet when the work needs to be reconceptualized as is inevitably the case from time to time, when new factors arise that cause accepted strategies and methodologies to break down, then theory can provide the basic principles for restructuring or reengineering processes. It can focus the justifications necessary to explain why we do what we do to our various clients and publics, and it can animate a vision necessary to unite staff behind new approaches. It is important for the profession to remember that the opposite of practical is impractical, not theoretical. Theory is rather the complement to practice, and theory and practice should interact and cross-fertilize each other, rather than one being derivative of or dependent on the other. A comment was raised in the discussion at Pittsburgh that recent studies show that 80 percent of scholarly refereed articles in the library science field are written by senior practitioners in the field; only 20 percent are written by full-time academics or their students. I would hazard a guess that an analysis of the authors of the refereed articles over the past twenty-five years in the *American Archivist* and *Archivaria* would reveal at least the same proportion, and probably higher in favor of practitioners, including most of the leading theoretical statements of this generation. Theory, on one hand, and methodology or practice on the other are not, therefore, the exclusive purview of academia or workplace.

I think the profession (not just educators) needs to heed very carefully Anne Gilliland-Swetland’s advice to respect, indeed encourage, diversity, imagination, and experimentation in developing education programs and various research methods.⁸ Challenge absolutes, as Bill Leggett counsels. Surely at the graduate level especially, we educators are not building cookie-cutters for

⁸Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland, “Archival Research: A ‘New’ Issue for Graduate Education,” appearing elsewhere in this issue of the *American Archivist*.

stamping out identical little archivists, let alone mirror images of ourselves. We need to remember the wider profession, as Sue McKemmish and her Australian colleagues have done so imaginatively in continuing education partnerships with the National Archives of Australia, and as Angelika Menne-Haritz outlines in her model. Surely we need to move from the black and whites of record-keepers versus cultural archivists, theory versus practice, information technology versus historical research methodologies, to more nuanced shades of gray.

We educators may talk all we wish in academic environments, but until the sometimes uneasy divide between university and workplace is breached, and some of these other dichotomies just mentioned are placed aside, our discussions will be sterile. Pittsburgh was a good start; let its dialogue continue and expand.