P R E S I D E N T I A L   A D D R E S S

Ten Challenges for the Archival Profession

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A b s t r a c t

The archival profession faces daunting challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Ten of the most pressing challenges facing archivists are identified and described. They include: managing electronic documents, devoting more resources to non-textual materials, recognizing that records are global, devising new methods for description and access, expanding access and collection development priorities, generating more research on the archival aspects of information management, strengthening the Society of American Archivists, expanding the resources of the archival enterprise, and maintaining the profession's role as trusted guarantors of society's interests.

I n my address last August as incoming president of SAA, I expressed my awareness of the daunting challenges facing the archival profession at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I concluded then that our knowledge and expertise are needed and appreciated, and that our prospects are good. I went on to assert that, through our combined interest in both confronting the challenges of contemporary information management and in preserving the documentary heritage of the world's cultures, we are strategically well positioned. This confluence of current needs and long-term societal interests provides opportunities for strengthening the archival profession, but the complexities that we face are considerable.[1] I have selected and will describe ten challenges that I feel are most pressing, both in the difficulties that they entail and in the scope of their impact on our profession.

[1] H. Thomas Hickerson, "The Archival Enterprise on Entering the Year 2000," *Archival Outlook,* November/December 1999, 14–16.

Dedication

I am pleased to dedicate my presidential address to Shonnie Finnegan. Shonnie was President of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 1985/1986. She had been elected a Fellow of the Society in 1975, served on Council and its Executive Committee, chaired the large and active Committee on College and University Archives, and chaired the 1974 Program Committee. From 1980 to 1984, she represented the SAA on the National Archives Advisory Council and served on the New York Historical Records Advisory Board from 1976 to 1985. She is also a past member of the Council and Executive Committee of the American Association of University Professors. She recently retired after some thirty years as university archivist at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and in 1979, she received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Librarianship at the State University of New York.

Shonnie was not exactly a mentor for me; she was more like an enthusiastic professional big sister. She organized the first SAA program session in which I spoke. She arranged my appointment to the College and University Archives Committee. She created a subcommittee on Documenting the University Community and appointed me chair. She later appointed me chair of the 1986 Program Committee, one of the great jobs one can have in SAA. All of this certainly contributed to my decision to dedicate today's remarks to Shonnie, who is not present but with whom I exchanged email last week, but the principal reason for my dedication is because of the thoughtful support she provided to so many of my generation of archivists, consistently exhibiting a generosity of spirit which I do not believe is as common today in SAA, but which is very much needed.

1. Managing the Identification, Appraisal, Retention, Preservation, and Provision of Support for the Use of Documents Generated in Electronic Form

Showing competency in this area is critical for two different reasons. Most obviously, a significant portion of present record production is in this form, and we must master the ability to fulfill our professional mandate for these materials. Perhaps of equal importance, we need to broadly convey evidence of our leadership in addressing these issues. If we do not, a line will be drawn separating us from responsibility for the records of today and tomorrow. Our value to our governments, institutions, and corporations will steadily diminish, and available resources will be allocated elsewhere as we become increasingly irrelevant and unsupported.

In many cases, implementing solutions will require extensive cooperation with other information management professionals. In our collaboration with others, we must be creative in delineating new arrangements of responsibility and management with record creators, records managers, technology staff, and those administering access. While I agree with Linda Henry, who insisted in her 1998 article, "Schellenberg in Cyberspace," that archivists should continue to appraise records based on both their informational and evidentiary value, I do not share her opinions regarding the significance of physical custody.[2] We must be flexible in our methods. We must focus on the goals of the archival mandate rather than on the specifics of practice, and, yes, on some days we may be like records managers in our work with records creators, and on other days, like librarians in administering global access to electronic files. In some ways, I find the debates of the past decade to be about issues of the twentieth century, but not equally germane in the twenty-first. The paradigm may have already shifted.

That we have not reached consensus on the ways to manage electronic records should not be interpreted as alleviating the urgency of our responsibilities or our public liabilities. If, however, we can demonstrate leadership in addressing these issues, we will be recognized as a source of much-needed expertise and reliability in an area of increasingly critical importance to the functioning of contemporary society.

2 .   D e v o t i n g   G r e a t e r   R e s o u r c e s   t o   N o n - t e x t u a l   H o l d i n g s

In today's society, where text is of decreasing centrality, we must be a more image- and sound-literate profession. We have often acted as if we assumed that text-based communication has always been the chief method of communication for all cultures, largely ignoring the long oral tradition in all societies, and the importance of art, architecture, music, ritual, dance, theater, and other non-textual and non-linear means of expression and recording. We must balance our resources to address these important segments of our collections, using these records more effectively to engage the broad interests of our users.

Most of us are aware of this need, but we are reluctant to embrace the necessary changes. Similar issues apply in most areas of collecting. As James O'Toole urges in his 1987 article, "Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England," archives should employ as broad a definition as possible of what records are and of what events and phenomena are worth documenting. In additional to the importance of still and motion picture photography, he points to the importance of the mass media in conveying evidence for the study

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[2] Linda J. Henry, "Schellenberg in Cyberspace," *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 314–27.

of religion. O'Toole also addresses the documentary value of religious art and decoration and of liturgical and other religious music. He raises the question of whether the balance will someday shift away from traditional manuscript sources.[3] If we now add the wealth of sources available via the Internet, integrating image, text, animation, motion, and sound in a new document collage, isn't it reasonable for the majority of repositories to devote at least half of their resources to non-textual materials?

3. Recognizing that Records are Global

We should not envision geographic or territorial boundaries as excluding documentary materials from our concern, and if appropriate, from our care. The archival mandate is truly international. All records identified as having archival value should matter to us. It is an underlying credo of the archival profession. How can one value records in one location and not in another?

Knowledge of the nature of records in relation to other cultures enriches our appreciation of the relationship between records and our own culture. An understanding of the complex nature of the relationship between archival records and the societies and organizations that generate documents provides a useful antidote to the potential for cultural and nationalistic bias.

Information management is also global. Communication and computing standards are already international in nature and application. There have been important institutional collaborations in recent years. The networked environment fosters a cooperative approach and significantly enhances the benefits of such projects. We should encourage the International Council on Archives to develop a new vision that fosters the creation of multinational digital archives. Shared knowledge and collaboration will strengthen our profession everywhere, and will also better prepare us in addressing critical archival emergencies worldwide.[4]

4. Devising New Methods for Describing and Providing User Access to the Ever-expanding Volume of Contemporary Records in All Formats

Archivists have not been able to provide comprehensive intellectual control of and access to their existing holdings through the use of the traditional description methods. While Encoded Archival Description and developing means of networked searching and display of finding aids will prove a valuable

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[3] James M. O'Toole, "Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987): 513–15.

[4] H. Thomas Hickerson, "SAA and the Archival Community Worldwide," *Archival Outlook,* January/ February 2000, 3, 29.

enhancement to our services and offers improvement in existing practice, they do not sufficiently alter the existing dynamic between collection growth and the human resources necessary to produce finding aids and other traditional tools. We have been slowly, but consistently, losing this battle; in the twenty-first century, without a major shift in methodology, we will be overwhelmed. If however, we are willing to adopt new strategies and methods, the same technologies that are generating records at an ever-increasing pace can be employed to identify, analyze, and preserve records, and to support and disseminate access to them.

Archivists have traditionally described records after appraising and accessioning them by examining their content and structure. In the electronic environment, post-accessioning description may prove difficult, but description could become a basic element in records creation. As David Bearman and Margaret Hedstrom describe in their 1993 article, "Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records: Alternative Service Delivery Options," "metadata about the records and the configuration of permissions, views, and functions is created and controlled in the active data environment. In principle, this metadata if correctly specified could fully describe and document the records without post-hoc activity by archivists. Archivists will need to specify what metadata must be kept and how it should be linked to records over time."[5] Because record creators and archivists have a similar stake in the same privacy, security, management, and use characteristics of records, it is in their mutual interest to jointly contribute to the associated costs of this process.

Bearman and Hedstrom also discuss ways in which this same model affects access and use. The unique nature of many paper records has significantly limited their availability, but in the case of electronic records, access can be distributed broadly, significantly expanding the ability of individuals to get information from archives. Perhaps of equal significance, metadata generated at the point of record creation may support item-level description without archivists having to engage in item-level description.[6]

Technologically, such changes are beginning to evolve, but it will require new professional roles and new institutional relationships and commitments. We have not yet fully tested and implemented the necessary new models for establishing this integrated continuum of creation, management, use, and preservation of records, and research and development is urgently needed. Nonetheless, I am cautiously optimistic, and I am hopeful that new methodologies developed for an electronic information environment will also supply us with new approaches to the description of existing paper holdings.

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[5] David Bearman and Margaret Hedstrom, "Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records: Alternative Service Delivery Options," in *Electronic Records Management Program Strategies,* Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report No. 18, edited by Margaret Hedstrom (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1993), 87.

[6] Bearman and Hedstrom, "Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records," 88.

5. Making Our Holdings More Accessible to and Usable by Our Core Constituencies and Broadening Use by Expanded Audiences

While enhancing our service to our core constituencies, we must develop new, secondary audiences. As Elsie Freeman Finch emphasizes in her introduction to *Advocating Archives,* "Use is our reason for being." All activities that encourage use comprise a core function that permeates everything we do.[7] Traditional hands-on use will remain essential and vital to our mission, but networked use will steadily expand. Users, wherever they are located, will expect to have access to both information and to associated services, whether they are the staff of multinational corporations or governmental diplomatic missions or interested researchers worldwide. In developing digital resources, we initially focused on content, but we are now beginning to turn our attention to designing and implementing the services necessary to support effective collection use in a networked environment. The use of focus groups and the analysis of data recording patterns of on-line navigation and use will help us develop useful and efficient means to meet the service needs of our various clientele.

Focusing on our users implies that we acknowledge the primacy of their needs and respond by utilizing methods that address those needs. Illustrative of these issues is Karen Collins's 1997 Pease Award-winning article, "Providing Subject Access to Images: A Study of User Queries." This study analyzed user requests for still photographs from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and from the North Carolina State Archives. Principal findings included: (1) the overwhelming majority of requests were for images to be used for publication or exhibition, as opposed to historical research; (2) 86% of queries included subject terms; (3) only 4% of all queries from either institution specified the creator of the image; and (4) not a single user requested to see an image in the context of an existing collection.[8] I do not need to comment on the meaning of these findings regarding the adequacy of access approaches that are largely provenance-based.

Karen Collins agrees with Sara Shatford Layne's conclusion in the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science,* that beyond subject categories, users' principal need is to be able to make visual distinctions between similar images by viewing them.[9] "Digital image databases that combine the thumbnail presentation of images with verbal indexing schemes provide the possibility of

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[7] Elsie Freeman Finch, Editor, *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1994) 1.

[8] Karen Collins, "Providing Subject Access to Images: A Study of User Queries," *American Archivists* 61 (Spring 1998): 45–52.

[9] Sara Shatford Layne, "Some Issues in the Indexing of Images," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 45 (September 1994): 586.

such access."[10] To really be user-centered in our activities, we have to be willing to embrace such findings and make tough strategic decisions about methods and resource allocation.

We should provide networked reference service and online advertisement of our holdings. We should also explore the development of multi-institutional portals aggregating access to related materials. Retrospectively converting more materials to digital form gives us the capacity to better serve existing audiences and to reach new audiences. Additionally, it enables more flexible and creative use of our holdings. And while I believe that we should avoid offering commercial vendors exclusivity, we should be open to the potential of for-profit entities to provide effective access for certain segments of the user market.

Innovative approaches in supporting use will often prove essential with information generated in electronic form, since users will often want to use them in the form in which they were created. Through systematic employment of digital technologies, we can establish a continuum of access to earlier records and to tomorrow's records, enhancing recognition of the value of both. We can keep yesterday's records relevant to future generations that will have been raised in a time when only images and information distributed digitally seem useable.

6. Expanding the Scope of Our Collection Development Priorities

We should always be striving to document the under-documented. The spectrum of human experience and human interest is always expanding, and we have a responsibility to be inclusive within the range of our institutional mandates. When I entered the profession some thirty years ago, the "new social history" was just beginning to evolve, and we were challenged to pursue records of women and minorities, who had been previously ignored. We were also asked to document aspects of human existence that had fallen outside the normal range of inclusion, documenting social and organizational relationships. Our acquiring of new documents must be based on both the recognition of existing gaps and the identification of new areas. During the past fifteen years, our increasing attention to sexuality and sexual politics in society is a good example. New areas of collecting may also require new kinds of records. Population and environmental studies, for example, will use newly generated geo-spatial data, along with more traditional records.

As our population becomes more ethnically diverse, our existing inadequacies in documenting minority communities become even more serious. In many cases, the best strategy is to support the growth of community-based archival programs, but in other cases, university, federal, and state initiatives are

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[10] Karen Collins, "Providing Subject Access to Images," 53.

needed. An outstanding example of the exercise of a state archival mandate through creative efforts to broaden documentation for overlooked aspects of a state's programs, organizations, and people is the joint effort of the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board and the State Archives and Records Administration to address new documentary priorities. Their three principal priorities are issues and experiences in the areas of (1) mental health, (2) environmental affairs, and (3) Latino communities. This initiative is designed to generate partnerships across a broad range of archives, academic programs and community agencies.[11]

7. Generating More Basic and Applied Research on Archival Aspects of Information Management

Research must be an integral component of the archival enterprise. Archivists have frequently expressed their concern for the lack of substantive research in many areas of archival work. Edie Hedlin focused her 1994 presidential address on the need to develop a greater infrastructure to support research, and in the past dozen years, significant progress has been made.[12] Faculty and graduate students at academic programs focusing on archival studies have made substantive contributions. Yet, the number of full-time faculty and doctoral students is still relatively few. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has offered greater support for electronic records research, and through SAA's representative on the Commission, we have encouraged the NHPRC to provide graduate research grants and to support research conducted within archival institutions. Conducting effective research is in large part dependent on the adequacy of financial support, and archival research needs a significant infusion of additional funding. The National Science Foundation, other government agencies, large foundations, and corporate interests should all be contributing.

Our issues are broadly compelling, but we have not conceptualized and presented them in such a way that their centrality is easily understood. We should work to better associate archival priorities with national issues presently drawing significant attention, such as security, privacy, authentication, authenticity, distributed networks, the life-cycle of information, digital library development, citizen access to information, networked user services, digital archiving, commercial use of information, copyright and information property rights management, and the relationship between records, information, and knowledge. We must convince influential decision-makers of both the importance of

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[11] New York State Historical Records Advisory Board, "NY Heritage Documentation Project," <http://www.nyshrab.org/nyheritagedoc.htm>.

[12] Edie Hedlin, "Expanding the Foundation," *American Archivist* 58 (Winter 1995): 10–15.

our questions and of our ability to address them, but we must also be willing to accept that much of the research vital to our interests will be conducted outside of the archival aegis. We need many others to care about and contribute to solving archival problems. Ideally, we should offer guidance to these inquiries, and most importantly, we should take advantage of the results to better address our basic goals.

8 .   S t r e n g t h e n i n g   O u r   N a t i o n a l   A r c h i v a l   O r g a n i z a t i o n

During this past year, I have consistently sought to highlight this issue because I think that a strong Society of American Archivists is central to our profession's capacity to address many of the other challenges I have enumerated. As Nicholas Burckel described in his 1997 Presidential Address, since SAA's founding in 1936, it has grown substantially, from 250 members in 1940 to 850 in 1965, to more than 3,000 today, a twelve-fold increase. It has become more democratic, more diverse, more complex, more productive, and a more influential organization. But as he points out, while SAA does many of the things that some larger allied organizations do—hold annual meetings, publish a journal and a newsletter, develop professional standards, offer educational programs, monitor and influence legislation, and educate the public regarding our principal issues—yet, the American Library Association is more than ten times our size, the American Historical Association is nearly four times as large, and the Organization of American Historians is nearly three times as large.[13]

A growing, dynamic, diverse, and dedicated membership is fundamental to SAA's strength. We need more members. While individual membership has been stable in 2000, and institutional membership has grown, this follows a period of moderate membership decline. While the extent of our mandate demands a larger membership, the resulting infusion of new ideas and talents is also essential in maintaining a dynamic organization. The growth of student chapters is an exciting new development with excellent promise for bringing some of the best and brightest into SAA. We also have to recruit young archivists already in the work force. In doing so, SAA must have an identifiable profile that generates interest. Involvement by new or potential members must be rewarding, stimulating, and enjoyable. The existing membership must be willing to devote resources, both personal and organizational, to welcoming and involving new archivists. We have to be willing to acknowledge that these individuals bring knowledge and perspective that can be as valuable to SAA and the profession as the experience of more senior members. It is not just about mentoring; the learning process should go both ways. SAA also must be a diverse organization in which members of minorities are actively recruited, and

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[13] Nicholas C. Burckel, "The Society: From Birth to Maturity," *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998): 32–34.

in which differing perspectives are valued. Archives are multi-cultural by their very nature; SAA must be, also.

In addition to recruiting new members, we must retain the involvement and support of long-time members. Senior archivists offer leadership, professional accomplishment, dedication, and understanding. Many have advanced to positions of significant influence in their organization. While some may no longer be identified as practicing archivists, their involvement may now be even more valuable. Maintaining an effective balance that encourages active involvement by new archivists while retaining the participation and commitment of more senior professionals is absolutely essential to the health and strength of this organization, and a strong national organization is essential to the success of the archival enterprise.

9. Augmenting the Range of Skills, Knowledge, and Resources Engaged in the Archival Enterprise

We should envision the archival endeavor as an industry, as well as a profession. We need more archivists, and soon, but not everyone contributing needs to be an archivist. Archival programs need technologists, Web designers, human factors experts, publicists, fundraisers, managers, lawyers, and administrators, as well as librarians, museum curators, records managers, exhibition designers, and preservation specialists. We need an organizational model that accommodates the diverse range of necessary skills. Within this model, archivists should take the lead in defining goals and objectives, devising appropriate methods, and ensuring the fulfillment of the archival mission, but we must depend on a far more expansive range of abilities and expertise.

This vision of our enterprise must influence our policies and practices at all levels. We must work to establish broad public appreciation of our concerns. We must support the creation and adoption of laws that facilitate the fulfillment of archival responsibilities. Long-term institutional and governmental commitments to the preservation of and access to records over time are essential. It is also vital to create and maintain alliances with kindred cultural and information management organizations. The development of technological infrastructure should incorporate features enhancing our ability to manage recorded information effectively, and individual repositories must be adequately equipped to address the needs of today's and tomorrow's information environment. Our approach to education and the necessary criteria for archival employment should be broadly conceived. It is no longer sufficient to focus only on archival principles and expertise. Everyone must have an underlying understanding of information technology and a flexible approach to learning new skills and devising new methods. Career-long continuing education is required, and we should assume that there will be constant change in both our organizations and

our practices. We must be able to envision many professions playing coordinated roles in realizing the archival mandate.

10. Maintaining the Credibility of Our Role as Respected Evidentiary Authorities and as Trusted Guarantors of Society's Interests, Today and in the Future

Archivists are seen as trusted agents of society, acting on everyone's behalf in insuring the preservation of those records necessary in protecting the legal rights of each citizen and in preserving the historical record of human achievement, of cultural evolution, and of everyday life. We have a special role in society, and we are respected as ombudsmen acting in the public as well as each individual interest. Sometimes we are insufficiently conscious of the special respect extended to our role, but it is one of the most important elements underlying our value and importance to society. We need to take the necessary steps to sustain our credibility by maintaining a high level of professionalism, by fulfilling our commitments, and by honoring our profession.

The dramatic nature of our role is forcefully conveyed in the words of H. L. White in his foreword to T. R. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques,* published in 1956. After describing the establishment of an Australian national archival program during the height of World War II, White, then Australia's Commonwealth Librarian and Archival Authority, writes, "We should expect that the continuing crisis provided by the discovery of atomic power to have a like effect on the preservation of archives in the future, unless we entirely abandon hope for our civilization. Indeed, one of the special problems facing archivists in their administrative relationships and in their public relations generally is just this uncertainty. In a very real sense the governmental and public attitude towards the preservation of archives is a measure of our faith in the future."[14] Now, nearly fifty years later, this belief in the value of the archival mission still conveys a measure of the public's faith in the future.

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[14] H. L. White, Foreword in *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* by T. R. Schellenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), vii–viii.