Partners in Preservation:

A Framework to Support and Maintain Community-Based Archives and Local History

Collections

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Statement of Issue

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Introduction

Using an ethics of praxis through collaboration and education, this essay presents a multi-faceted framework to ensure community ownership of archival materials.[1] This paper focuses primarily on archives and local history collections that have not been removed from their respective communities and does not address collections already in larger archival institutions. In the United States, where many communities and groups have a fuller understanding of their cultural significance and context through networked media, and where the historical record is used as evidence, community knowledge is best understood when interpreted and disseminated by natives. Archives and special collections repositories moving from a narrative of collecting to one of empowerment will help bring attention to "hidden treasures" with richer and more meaningful description, as well as the facilitation of cultural documentation, which will in turn promote the diffusion of information and scholarship. This can be done through a weaving of government and organizational funding, multiple methods of education, and collaborative partnerships.

Archives and the Archivist Today

Traditional archival theory began in Europe, where national, state and religious archives were constructed as passive repositories for institutional records. Archives were part of governmental structure and as such, were not necessarily considered spaces for cultural memory. As sites of institutional memory, archives were privileged locations for the selection of materials to represent state and government histories. Funding for archives generally came from the institution (government, private, academic) being archived, reinforcing dominant power structures. Following the establishment of academic archives in

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[1] The term "community" is used loosely to describe a group of people that agree they are linked by culture or locality.

the United States in the 1920s, personal papers, special collections and manuscripts began to be deposited in archival repositories.[2] Collections and groupings rarely reflected local communities, particularly marginalized groups, instead representing the lives of individuals and groups within the confines of the existing institution. Archivists separated themselves from historians and records managers, developing professional training requirements in the form of apprenticeships and professional jargon. This professionalization of the field helped to establish boundaries for entry into the field and led to the formulation of professional standards for the organization and description of, as well as access to, archival materials. These standards were created primarily by and for government and institutional archives, reinforcing the hegemony of governments and institutions.

Although there is no particular moment in American archival history that pushed archival collection into the records of cultures (and not just of institutions), the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s can be considered strong influences on the shift. In response these social and political changes, archivists began actively collecting documents and records from groups and individuals in an effort to document "authentic" identity and "real" culture[3]. Popular ideas about balancing the archival record and presenting authentic and human records in the archive spread quickly and continue to influence archival work. Special collections fieldwork brought the archivist into the community to gather gifts and donations to the archive. The impetus to collect soon became the fervor to *possess*, and many repositories were caught up in competitions for "gems" and historical curiosities, many of which had little or nothing to do with the missions or collections of the archives. Archivists began to collect any medium that could be a record of a culture, including manuscripts, textiles, and sacred artifacts. Timothy Ericson has noted that archivists have

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[2] See Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession," in Randall Jimerson, <u>American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice</u> for additional American archival history.
[3] Elisabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," p. 146-148.

kept materials not relevant to their institution's holdings for the sake of "saving" those materials, "equating preservation with possession."[4]

In some cases, this passion for collecting can be compared to museum acquisition, whereby artifacts are gathered wholesale and placed into storage. Emphasis is placed on the objects instead of the information they contain, as demonstrated in an example where a museum had amassed "more than two hundred eighteenth-century pottery milk-jugs, in the form of a cow. They ranged side by side on a shelf…like some huge herd on a farm. This is investment banking, not museology."[5] The influence of traditional anthropology is obvious: collecting "artifacts" of a particular people, race, or ethnicity without concern for the subtleties of history colonizes identities and takes materials out of context. Accumulation of materials of value (either cultural or monetary) can bring prestige to the archive in the form of additional donations as well as political power, but also creates an incredible backlog of materials that may never be accessed or studied in the acquiring archivist's lifetime. Often, the archivist herself becomes a living archive of knowledge about the collections – and with massive backlogs, the loss of an archivist means the loss of provenance as well as any relevant ties and information about that community.

American archivists have presented themselves as neutral and objective participants in archival work, as expressed in the Society of American Archivists' Code of Ethics, which tends to form the foundation for archivist professional ethics.[6] The SAA Code of Ethics as it appears today is a pared-down, legalese version of the illustrative and specific first version of 1980, which included examples and explanations.[7] As noted by archival theorist Verne Harris, most writing about archival ethics is either theoretical or case study-based, with little in between with regard to the way that theory is applied in real life.[8] The binary nature of archival ethics avoids the challenges of the personal versus the institutional and simply

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4 In his article "At the 'rim of creative dissatisfaction': Archivists and Acquisition Development," in Jimerson, Ericson discusses problems with backlogs and competitive acquisition, p. 177 and 182.
5 Kenneth Hudson's "Museums for the 1980s," quoted in Ericson, p. 183.
6 Archivists "should not allow personal beliefs or perspectives to affect their decisions."
7 See Randall Jimerson's explanation of the changes in "Ethical Concerns for Archivists," p. 90.
8 Harris speaks about praxis in archival ethics at Archives and Ethics: Reflections on Practice Conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

states that archivists must be neutral. Of course, being neutral is nearly impossible when today's archivists "appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built," and in places where notions of identity are reinforced and validated. [9] The "neutral archivist" connotes sterility and complacency, which rarely occur in the daily work of an individual working with identity props and records of change.

The relationship between the archivist and the formation of identity (national and cultural) is an important power dynamic, whereby larger institutions have the capability of legitimizing, as well as minimizing, the memories and records of groups and communities. If materials are not, at minimum, described by insiders from a particular community, their cultural and historical relevancy is compromised. Because there is no clause in the SAA Code of Ethics (or elsewhere in the archival paradigm) regarding a duty to community outreach or collaboration, with the exception of a brief mention of awareness of "cultural sensitivities," archivists at larger archival institutions are in a difficult position with regard to community-based archival collections. Using a politically correct rhetoric of diversity and authenticity in the archives, archivists have had to make cultural and historical identity differences immutable, pushing an essentialist view of the nuances of community identity.

Community-Based Archives and Local History Collections

Volunteers, library assistants, and librarians with little or no archival training often serve as caretakers for local and community-based archives, libraries, and collections. These "archivists by default" tend to become major sources of knowledge about a community and its records, making the records and information about those materials geographically and culturally contexualized. The community member becomes a gatekeeper of history for that community. Materials in the local history collection of a public library or in the holdings of an ethnic history museum are not always unique, such as photocopies of original documentation, but in many cases there are "gems" that hold specific and symbolic value in the formulation of a community's historic identity. A photograph of a cultural practice means something different when displayed by a library in that community, versus in the backlogged holdings of a larger state or university repository.

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[9] Kaplan, p. 126.

Community-based archives and collections, in being located within the physical spaces defined by a community, have a symbolic meaning for individuals in that community. While larger archives establish an institution's power and ownership, so does the community-based archive symbolize a space that "belongs" to the people within that community. It is not just the content within the archive that is important here: the library or archive itself holds particular cultural value.[10]. In many cases, communities have a semiotic understanding of their resources and call upon society to answer the obligations of democracy.[11] Of course, the records themselves retain meaning and value for a community when held in this context. James O'Toole argues for the symbolic nature of archival records and archives, and Kenneth Foote notes the power of the archive to "sustain cultural traditions and values".[12] Personal experience and memory are a form of archive, but in Western society, the record in hand serves as evidential proof of history versus oral narrative and folklore. The collective memory of a community is supplemented and sustained by its records as well as symbolic and cultural values – all of which can be described by members of the community, who likely may have learned about local history through narrative tradition.

Records give historical provenance and evidence of existence of people and places that may no longer exist. When communities have power over the records about and evidence of themselves, they have the power to write their own history. Historian Jeannette Allis Bastian states that "a people cannot truly be masters of their own history and understand their identity unless they have access to their records."[13] Technology allowing archivists-by-default to digitize and make widely available archival resources helps

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[10] Robert Horton describes the binary relationship of community assets to community identity: "a place has a school or it does not, it is a community or it is not," p. 34.

[11] Alessandro Portelli, in his article "Lookin' for a Home: Independent Oral History Archives in Italy," cites an email petition to support a small independent archive as a "democratic cultural resource," page 223, Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar.

[12] Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," in Jimerson, p. 30.

[13] Bastian speaks to the removal of archival records from the Virgin Islands to the archives of Denmark (the country that colonized the islands) in Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History p. 84.

democratize information and maximizes the boundaries of community identity. Nomadic people and diasporic communities can be reunited and tell their stories through the internet, and in effect have greater ability to speak for themselves and their histories. This power of narrative gives people self-esteem and a sense of self-sufficiency that leads to empowerment and a greater understanding of a community's historical context.[14] A local history collection or community-based archive can be an important cultural asset if the surrounding community feels tied to the materials within.

The Collaboration, Education, and Funding Framework

Robert Horton, head of the Minnesota Historical Society, surmises that "local documentation is likely to be primarily a local responsibility; accordingly, the question becomes how to sustain viable archival programs at the local level."[15] For those representatives of archives and libraries wanting to keep their materials in their communities, a multi-faceted framework of collaboration, education, and funding, which lead into and rely on one another, may be a viable method to support the maintenance of these collections.[16] Effectively, archivists can stay true to their code of ethics to preserve and make available historical and documentary records of enduring value – even records that are not in their possession. Jeannette Allis Bastian notes that archivists have an imperative for access, as they are "ideally placed to assist communities in retrieving their pasts, affirming the rights of communities to embrace collective memory in all its forms, and helping communities 'go back and fetch it.'"[17] Archivists wanting to promote themselves and their archives as *active disseminators* of information must declare their roles in the power dynamic between large and small archives in order to maintain their dedication to the greater knowledge. As a result, we must also move away from the ethics that asks archivists to depersonalize their relationships with the materials – and instead, consider our own relationships with communities tied to archival records. An ethics of praxis, by which archivists merge their theory of multiculturalism and community empowerment with the

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[14] Lisa Singer, The Value of Community-Based Ethnic Archives: A Resource in Development, p. 50.
[15] Horton, p. 37.
[16] A graphic representation of the framework can be found in Appendix A.
[17] Bastian, p. 87.

practice of actively engaging with communities, can result in greater information for researchers.

Collaboration is perhaps the most widely accepted (yet least understood) facet of the framework. In many areas of the library and archival realm, the term has become something of a buzzword. By sharing resources, programs, and goals, community archivists can gain an understanding of larger institutions and feel that their contributions are valued. Open lines of communication help to create partnerships and help bridge gaps in understanding about archival practices as well as any preconceived notions either type of archive may have. A regional archival alliance consisting of multiple types of repositories or an archival brain trust where new ideas or problems can be circulated are inexpensive ways to present publicly a network of resources. These knowledge groups help bring multiple epistemologies and archival approaches to the table. Self-sufficiency is attained through harvestable standards and democratized access to archival standards; collaboration facilitates this process. In addition, inter-archival loan networks and traveling exhibits bring attention to historical records without extracting them and while permitting native forms of self-expression. Smaller archives, such as Visual Communications, an Asian-American nonprofit organization and archive in Los Angeles, can deposit some of their more fragile or endangered materials with a supporting institution, such as has been done with the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles.

The National Forum on Archival Continuing Education sponsored by the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, held in April 2000, sought to address concerns in the archival field with educating recordkeepers in the United States. This event brought attention to the core facet of the framework and included an action agenda created by the archivists, curators, and archivists-by-default in attendance.[18] The proceedings of the 2006 New Skills for a Digital Era colloquium, sponsored by SAA, the National Archives, and Arizona State Library and Archives, explored the basic skills needed for records managers to work with digital materials. Archival training and education is at the heart of misunderstandings and mistrust between archives large and small, and a number of

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[18] The Core Components of Archival Continuing Education section of the NFACE final report is included in Appendix B.

organizations and institutions have attempted to mediate the disparate ideas of what "archival work" means. Laura Millar Coles' *Manual for Small Archives*, the SAA Archival Fundamentals series, and a number of instructional books have been published, in addition to websites and online toolkits including the Online Archive of California's "Best Practices" site. Workshops, such as the SAA "summer camps," typically held in San Diego, as well as online classes, are available. A one-stop resource website such as the Council of State Archivists' "Archives Resource Center" permits archivists-by-default to learn standards and get resources for free. These educational resources could be incorporated into regional networks.

Local networks, built through collaboration, can foster training by larger institutions for smaller institutions by creating an environment for shared learning and communication. Multiple ways of knowing should be valued and diverse methods for processing and describing archival materials should be considered alternates to the "ideal." Methods such as Greene and Meissner's "More Product, Less Process," which is being taught in the Midwest, can benefit archivists-by-default as they navigate their own backlogs – and permit them to focus on research and access.[19] Basic archival training is key when considering the crisis that can result from the loss of the archivist who is the archive, an archivist who knows everything about the archives but does not write anything down due to other responsibilities or administrative complications. Archivists-by-default are often overwhelmed and wear multiple hats, so flexibility on the part of the larger institution is crucial. At the same time, the establishment and distribution of archival standards should be done as inclusively as possible, to promote widely-accepted standards that permit greater access to researchers and communities. The American Association for State and Local History, working with a group of recordkeepers from large and small institutions, is creating a set of stewardship and administrative standards for museums and historical organizations, which could be adopted voluntarily across the US.[20] Without localized education programs, however, these standards and methods will not be implemented.

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[19] See Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing."
[20] The AASLH Standards should be released "in mid-2009," according to http://www.aaslh.org/

Education and collaboration efforts, like most work related to historical records, rely almost entirely on funding. Funding is perhaps the most difficult to establish for a small archive or local history collection with a small collection of archives, a handful of which may be considered "treasures." Mandated government funding for small archives, such as the Preserving the American Historical Record (PAHR) bill, is vital to the success of local collections. The PARH bill, currently being prepared for introduction to the House of Representatives, would "provide federal formula grants to every state for projects that preserve historical records and make them more accessible."[21] Money is the greatest factor in whether an archival collection is preserved, rehoused, and stored to minimal standards. Grant projects should include a section of funds reserved solely for smaller repositories. Government and private funding for education, the creation of standards (such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services' sponsorship of the AASLH Standards Project), and digitization projects help smaller archives focus on access and description instead of paying the bills.

The issue of long-term support for community-based archives and local history collections remains a major challenge, since grant funding typically involves money to preserve particular types of materials and not to help keep up facilities where materials are held. Funding for digitization efforts, including inclusion in digital consortia such as the Online Archive of California, bring attention to special items in smaller collections without removing them, and promote long-term access and research. The Archivists' Toolkit is an open source, free application that can promote universal standards for description and access of archival materials; however, like many archival resources, it appears to be skewed to the relatively seasoned archivist and not the archivist-by-default. We must consider simplifying these standards for the sake of access to archival collections by incorporating other types of stakeholders, such as local historians, community recordkeepers, and untrained library staff – or bring these voices to the decision-making table.

Benefits of Promoting Community-Based Collections

IncrementalStd.htm.

[21] See http://www.archivists.org/pahr/

Maintaining the collections of community-based archives and local history collections within communities may seem counterintuitive to the fieldwork and acquisition-oriented archivist, but it is consistent with the ethics of the archivist to promote learning and *exposure* to the historical record. Supporting these collections through collaboration, education, and funding helps to build a sense of trust with the communities involved, which may in turn lead to more use of larger archives and eventually lead to community members feeling safe representing themselves in the institutional context. This cycle of community buy-in and participation is an organic source of publicity for the institutional archive, which may find its efforts attracting native informants to the archival field. Training and collaboration build community awareness and a sense of historical value, which will motivate community archivists-by-default – community gatekeepers – to become archivists for their own community's knowledge, in their own way.

It can be argued that archivists-by-default, as the sole representatives of archival standards and preservation, should be trained *more* extensively than institutional archivists, who often have more opportunities to learn and reinforce these standards. Divergent ways of knowing and describing historical materials promote a pluralized archival paradigm, where multiple archival methods and materials are acknowledged.[22] There should be a balance between this apparent paradox of institutional and community-based epistemologies, determined by the community representatives themselves. Because small archives are often considered community assets, change must occur from within after establishing a relationship with larger repositories. In effect, the framework becomes rooted in community values and implemented by so-called "non-archivists," promoting a cycle that brings greater access and furthers historical knowledge. By permitting "indigenous forms of self-expression," larger archives bring positive attention to themselves and archivists become true activists for underserved and marginalized groups.[23]

Conclusion

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[22] See Gilliland, et al. in "Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm through Education," which argues that members of communities are best positioned to describe and organize records related to their communities, and that multiple ontologies in recordkeeping and archival practice are relevant.
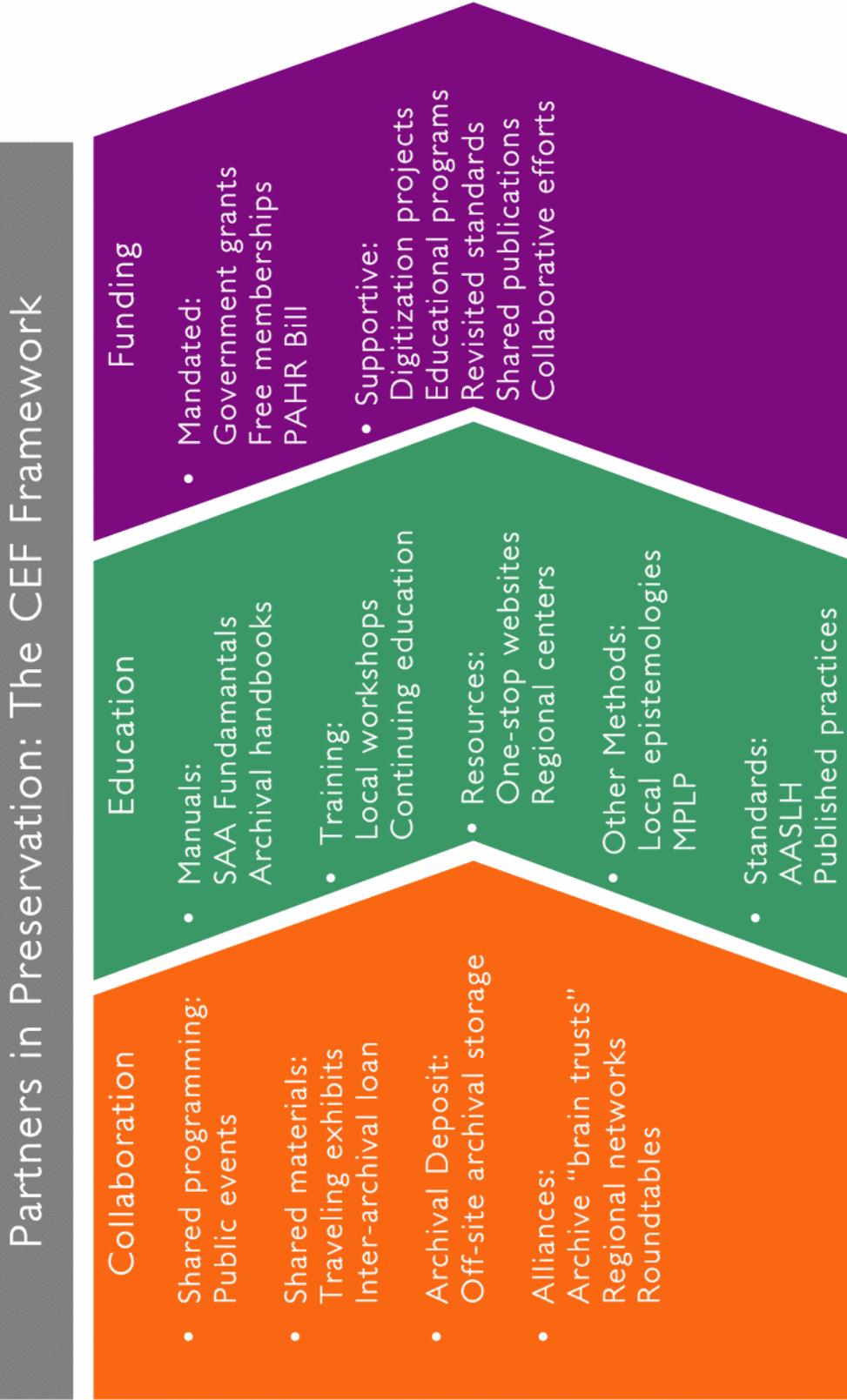[23] Brown, p. 10.

Archives have become entangled in politicized webs of competition for materials of "enduring value," complicated by incorporating the collections of small communities and marginalized groups. Archives that pride themselves on the size of their holdings, marking their territory, and hawking what they possess, instead of information and community empowerment, have an ethical obligation to consider the result of removing materials from the communities that understand these materials best. The archivist is never neutral, even when attempting to collect artifacts and records that they believe represent a culture, narrative, or community. In the words of Howard Zinn, "the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft."[24] In the everyday work of the archivist, the ethical and the political are implicated in each other, and the personal and institutional are impossible to separate.[25] Archivists-by-default and historical recordkeepers should be seen as the primary decisionmakers with regard to identity and collective memory, and a move from acquisition policy to collaboration, education, and funding should occur from within the institutional archive. This new set of ethics permits multiple voices in the archival canon, a greater understanding of primary sources in context and empowers communities to speak for themselves – to reclaim their history and have the ability to tell and re-tell their stories through their own archives.

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[24] Zinn, p. 170.
[25] Harris.

Appendix A

Partners in Preservation: The CEF Framework

Collaboration

- Shared programming:
  Public events

- Shared materials:
  Traveling exhibits
  Inter-archival loan

- Archival Deposit:
  Off-site archival storage

- Alliances:
  Archive "brain trusts"
  Regional networks
  Roundtables

Education

- Manuals:
  SAA Fundamantals
  Archival handbooks

- Training:
  Local workshops
  Continuing education

- Resources:
  One-stop websites
  Regional centers

- Other Methods:
  Local epistemologies
  MPLP

- Standards:
  AASLH
  Published practices

Funding

- Mandated:
  Government grants
  Free memberships
  PAHR Bill

- Supportive:
  Digitization projects
  Educational programs
  Revisited standards
  Shared publications
  Collaborative efforts

Core Components of Archival Continuing Education

The NFACE Core Components were developed to provide a framework for analyzing current and future archival continuing education. They help define just what functions, activities, or topics constitute the knowledge base for this type of archival education.

The NFACE Program Committee used the core components to identify gaps, overlaps, and areas of particular concern in archival continuing education. That information led to the identification of topics for the Information and the Incubator Sessions. We believe these components provide a useful structure for analysis and consideration of archival continuing education needs and issues. This list is not intended to be a final, comprehensive statement, but a practical organizing tool that may assist further assessment and analysis of the core components of archival continuing education.

The list of core components was derived from several excellent resources, including:

The Society of American Archivists' *Guidelines for the Development of Post-Appointment and Continuing Education and Training (PACE) Programs*, and other documents developed by SAA's Committee on Education and Professional Development (www.archivists.org/prof-education/pace.asp)

The Academy of Certified Archivists' *Role Delineation* document which defines the knowledge and skills necessary for archival work (www.certifiedarchivists.org/html/RoleDelineation.html)

The National Park Service's *Essential Competencies: Museum Management Archivist Track*, which defines the competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities needed to perform in this discipline (www.nps.gov/training/npsonly/RSC/archivst.htm#1)

Data gathered from the NFACE surveys and focus groups also informed the development of this document.

Records management

- Basic elements of records management
- Recordkeeping systems
- Retention and disposition
- Information technologies (microfilm, computer, etc.)
- Files management
- Life cycle of records

Basic elements of archival programs

- Starting an archival program
- Introduction to core elements (identified as general categories below)

Identification and retention of records

- Appraisal
- Collection evaluation
- Documentation planning
- Donor relations
- Acquisition
- Accessioning
- Deaccessioning
- Archival surveys
- Legal transfer/acquisition

Arrangement and description

- Arrangement
- Description
- Descriptive standards for data structure (e.g., MARC, EAD)
- Descriptive standards for data content (e.g., APPM)
- Descriptive standards for data values (e.g., LCSH, AAT)
- Archival authority information
- Subject access/indexing
- Automated access
- Dealing with special formats
- Creation of access tools (finding aids, guides)

Reference

- Customer se/vice issues for internal and external customers
- Security
- Copyright
- Administration of access: privacy, confidentiality, FOI
- Usage documentation
- User education

Outreach

- Public relations
- Exhibits
- Educational uses of archives (especially classroom)
- Using archival materials for public relations

Electronic records

- Management of electronic records
- Preservation of electronic records
- Information policy

Preservation

- Collection storage (environmental issues, pests, vermin)
- Disaster planning
- Recovery (after disasters)
- Reformatting (microfilm, digitization, standards)
- Care of materials (various formats)
- Handling techniques
- Conservation treatments
- Preservation administration

Program Management

- Fundraising
- Grants management
- Financial management
- Program planning and organizational management
- Strategic planning
- Management of buildings, facilities, equipment
- Advocacy
- Project management

Managing people

- Human resources management
- Supervision
- Managing volunteer programs
- Leadership skills

Professional knowledge

- Professional ethics
- History of archives, archival organizations
- History of archival legislation

Research

- Research methods in archival practice and theory
- Research in subject fields: tools and methods for American history, cultural or natural history research

Technology applications

(there are many overlaps between functional area skills and technology)

- Developing websites for access
- Web exhibits
- Applying technology to manage archival business practices

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